

Reimagining the EU'S Caucasus Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving role of the European Union (EU) in the South Caucasus, a region marked by geopolitical complexity and historical tensions. The primary aim is to explore how the EU can effectively engage with South Caucasian states to promote stability, economic development, and democratic governance. Central to this investigation are key research questions: What obstacles hinder effective EU engagement? How can regional cooperation models be structured to ensure mutual benefit among the states involved? What strategies can the EU adopt to enhance its role as a facilitator of peace in the region? Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature and recent EU initiatives, the study identifies critical challenges such as external influences from neighboring powers and the diverse political contexts within the region. It highlights effective cooperation models that emphasize shared interests and collective benefits, suggesting that an EU-led framework could anchor regional collaboration while promoting aspirations for sovereignty among South Caucasian states. The findings indicate that for the EU to be perceived as a credible partner, it must adopt a more context-sensitive approach, integrating local realities into its strategic framework. Additionally, fostering economic interdependencies and promoting cultural exchange are essential for building trust and initiating dialogue. The overall conclusion posits that a transformative EU strategy can play a pivotal role in redefining the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, transitioning it from a contested space to one characterized by pluralism, cooperation, and sustainable development. This study underscores the importance of collaborative frameworks that prioritize both regional ownership and external support, ultimately contributing to a peaceful and prosperous future for the South Caucasus. The overall conclusion is sustainable progress in the Black Sea region requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and a commitment to cooperation among regional actors. Consequently, the document advocates for a recalibrated EU approach to the Southern Caucasus that focuses on building trust, promoting energy diversification, and fostering inclusive economic cooperation to enhance regional stability and prosperity.

Keywords: European Union, South Caucasus , Geopolitical dynamics, Regional cooperation, Economic development, Democratic governance, Conflict resolution, Strategic Management,

1. Introduction

The South Caucasus stands at a pivotal juncture in Europe's evolving geopolitical landscape. Long perceived as a peripheral zone shaped by imperial legacies and great-power rivalries, the region now demands a strategic reimagining—one that transcends reactive diplomacy and embraces a forward-looking, integrated approach. The European Union, through its Black Sea Strategy and expanding engagement with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, is uniquely positioned to catalyze this transformation. Yet the challenge is not merely to extend influence, but to foster a post-imperial order rooted in plural sovereignty, ecological stewardship, and inclusive governance.

This paper argues that a credible EU strategy for the Caucasus must move beyond ad hoc initiatives and fragmented partnerships. It must articulate a coherent roadmap that aligns security, connectivity, and cultural diplomacy with the normative principles of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. By anchoring regional cooperation in shared values and measurable targets—while remaining sensitive to local agency and geopolitical complexity—the EU can help shape a resilient, interconnected, and peaceful Caucasus. What follows is not a blueprint for domination, but a framework for empowerment: one that leverages synergy, nurtures interdependence, and redefines the region as a space of cooperation rather than contestation.

The South Caucasus occupies a strategically significant position within Europe's geopolitical landscape, characterized by a complex interplay of historical legacies, regional conflicts, and the interests of major powers. Once perceived as a peripheral area shaped by the remnants of imperial domination and great-power rivalries, the region now demands a transformative approach that goes beyond reactive and piecemeal diplomatic efforts. With the evolving dynamics of global politics, particularly in light of Russia's assertive actions and the ongoing conflicts in neighboring areas, the role of the European Union (EU) becomes ever more crucial in facilitating stability and fostering collaborative development.

Argument

This study seeks to critically examine the current state of EU engagement in the South Caucasus, particularly how it aligns with the aspirations of local states for sovereignty, security, and economic growth. The EU's recent strategies, including the Black Sea Strategy, reflect a commitment to enhance regional security, promote sustainable development, and support democratic governance. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is contingent upon the EU's ability to navigate the intricate realities on the ground, adapt to local contexts, and engage with diverse stakeholders in a meaningful manner.

We argue the European Union's potential role in the South Caucasus. The argument is grounded in empirical evidence related to geopolitical dynamics, historical conflicts, and current events affecting the region. It follows a logical structure, progressing from discussions of external influences to the EU's strategic approaches, which facilitates understanding. The research critically evaluates the effectiveness of EU policies while acknowledging

counterarguments from neighboring powers such as Russia and Turkey. Employing sound reasoning, the study connects evidence of regional instability to the necessity for a coherent EU engagement strategy. Clear language and terminology are utilized, making complex geopolitical concepts accessible to a wide audience.

The contextual relevance of the argument is established through references to existing literature on BSEC and the roles of external actors, demonstrating an understanding of the broader scientific conversation surrounding regional cooperation. Ethical considerations are implicitly addressed, particularly in terms of promoting stability and human rights in the region. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of engaging local stakeholders, advocating for grassroots involvement in decision-making processes. Ultimately, the conclusions drawn highlight the need for the EU to adopt a flexible and context-sensitive approach, suggesting that effective strategies can foster regional stability and enhance cooperation in the South Caucasus.

Objectives of the Study

The overarching aim of this research is to articulate a coherent roadmap that aligns the European Union's strategic vision with the distinct needs and aspirations of the South Caucasian countries. In a region long shadowed by imperial legacies and geopolitical contestation, the EU stands at a crossroads—poised either to perpetuate distant diplomacy or to embrace a transformative role as a partner in peace, development, and pluralism.

This study embarks on a multidimensional inquiry: to analyze the existing challenges and untapped opportunities in the EU's engagement with the South Caucasus; to identify effective models of regional cooperation that can serve as scaffolding for stability and inclusive growth; to evaluate the impact of external actors—both allies and antagonists—on the region's political and economic climate; and to propose actionable recommendations that elevate the EU's capacity to foster reconciliation and sustainable governance.

By dissecting the intricacies of regional integration, security collaboration, and economic development, this investigation seeks not merely to diagnose dysfunctions but to illuminate pathways toward mutual trust and enduring partnership. Ultimately, it aspires to contribute to the emergence of a post-imperial Caucasus—one that is not merely adjacent to Europe, but integrally woven into its democratic and cooperative fabric.

Scope of the Study

This study will examine deep into the shifting sands of South Caucasian geopolitics—where empires whisper, borders blur, and alliances dance. It'll trace the tangled interplay 'tween the EU, Russia, and local powers, each vying for influence in a region caught 'twixt memory and momentum.

It'll map the economic pulse, the social undercurrents, the political tremors—each thread woven into the broader tapestry of security and cooperation. It'll ask: Who leads? Who lingers? Who listens? It'll ask: What binds? What breaks? What builds? It'll ask: How does Europe extend its hand—not as a master, but as a partner?

Through this lens, the study seeks not just to analyze, but to illuminate—a contemporary reckoning with the forces shaping EU-Caucasus relations, and a vision for what might rise from the ruins of rivalry: a region reborn in trust, in balance, in shared destiny.

Research Questions

1. What are the main obstacles to effective EU engagement in the South Caucasus?
2. How can regional cooperation models be structured to ensure mutual benefits among South Caucasian states?
3. In what ways do external actors influence the political and economic landscape of the South Caucasus?
4. What strategies can the EU employ to strengthen its role as a facilitator of peace and stability in the region?

This study contributes to the understanding of regional security dynamics in the South Caucasus, thus informing policymakers on effective approaches for EU engagement. By highlighting models of cooperation, it aims to provide a framework for developing sustainable strategies that address regional challenges. The findings will be relevant for academics and practitioners interested in postimperial theories and their application in contemporary geopolitical contexts. Ultimately, this 5 research seeks to enhance the role of the EU as a constructive partner in promoting democracy, economic development, and conflict resolution in the South Caucasus.

Literature Review

The academic and policy literature on EU engagement in the South Caucasus reveals a complex interplay of strategic ambition, normative projection, and geopolitical constraint. Scholars have variously framed the region as a liminal space—caught between post-Soviet fragmentation and European integration—where the EU's role remains contested and evolving (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015; Emerson & Tocci, 2009). This tension is compounded by the EU's historically low strategic prioritization of the South Caucasus, as evidenced by its delayed and uneven integration into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) frameworks (Korosteleva, 2012; Börzel & Risse, 2012).

Meliha Altunisik and Oktay Tanrisever (2004) adopt a multidisciplinary perspective in their study of the South Caucasus, integrating insights from political science, international relations, and regional studies. They focus on the interplay between regionalism, security dynamics, energy geopolitics, and European integration, employing a constructivist lens to understand how regional identities and historical narratives shape foreign policies and regional cooperation. Central to their analysis is the concept of "regionness," through which they examine how Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia perceive themselves as a cohesive entity and how external powers influence these perceptions. They also assess the role of the European Union in promoting Europeanization in the region, highlighting the challenges and limitations faced by South Caucasus states in aligning with EU norms and standards. In addition, they explore the strategic importance of energy resources and infrastructure, such as pipelines, and how these intersect with security concerns and broader geopolitical rivalries. While their work provides a comprehensive analysis, some critics argue that it places excessive emphasis on EU

influence and underestimates the role of other regional powers, and that it offers limited concrete policy recommendations for stakeholders in the region.

Recent analyses suggest that the EU's potential lies not in geopolitical competition, but in fostering stability through socio-economic development, environmental cooperation, and inclusive regional connectivity (Dienes, 2021; Hushcha, 2023). The Clingendael Institute (2022) emphasizes the EU's implicit objectives—such as countering Russian influence and securing energy corridors—alongside its explicit commitments to good governance and human rights. Meanwhile, scholars like Freire and Simão (2020) highlight the importance of local agency and the need for a more pluralistic, bottom-up approach to regional engagement. These studies collectively underscore the need for a recalibrated EU strategy that balances normative ambition with pragmatic engagement, while remaining sensitive to the region's plural identities, ecological vulnerabilities, and external pressures.

Houman Sadri (2010), in his study of conflict and cooperation in the South Caucasus, employs an interdisciplinary approach that combines international relations theory with historical and cultural analysis. He draws on realism, liberalism, and constructivism to examine the complex dynamics of regional conflict and cooperation. Sadri emphasizes the significance of historical narratives and identity in shaping the foreign policies of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. He provides an indepth analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other regional disputes, exploring their origins, development, and implications for regional stability. At the same time, he considers mechanisms for cooperation, including energy projects and regional organizations, assessing their potential to foster stability and integration. Critiques of Sadri's work note that the application of multiple theoretical frameworks can be complex and challenging for readers, and that economic dimensions of regional cooperation and conflict receive less attention compared to political and security issues.

Both Altunisik and Tanrisever, and Sadri, offer valuable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of the South Caucasus. Their works enhance understanding of the region's complexities, though they also highlight areas requiring further research and analysis.

Delcour and Hoffmann (2020) adopt a critical policy-analysis perspective, combining EU studies with comparative regional analysis. They focus on the European Union's external governance instruments and normative strategies in the Eastern Partnership countries, with particular attention to the South Caucasus. Their approach emphasizes the gap between EU policy design and the political realities on the ground, using both qualitative case studies and institutional analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of EU interventions. Delcour and Hoffmann argue that EU policies in the South Caucasus face a persistent tension between normative aspirations and local political contexts. The Union promotes democratization, rule of law, and conflict resolution as part of its Europeanization agenda, yet these efforts often encounter structural limitations, entrenched power dynamics, and competing regional influences from Russia and Turkey. They highlight the limited traction of EU initiatives, noting that local actors may engage with the EU for strategic or economic reasons without fully embracing its normative agenda. The authors also stress that while EU frameworks provide resources and institutional mechanisms, their effectiveness is constrained by domestic political constraints and uneven governance capacity in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. While Delcour and Hoffmann provide a nuanced assessment of the EU's normative limitations, their analysis tends to focus heavily on structural obstacles, sometimes underplaying examples of local agency and successful EU-supported

reforms. Additionally, the work offers limited practical guidance on how the EU might better align its normative goals with the political realities of the South Caucasus, leaving open questions about actionable policy adjustments.

Davit Machitadze's analysis in *The EU and the South Caucasus: European Neighborhood Policies between Eclecticism and Pragmatism (1991–2021)* explores the complex and often contradictory relations between the European Union and the South Caucasus. He employs Europeanization theory and a mixed rationalist-constructivist framework to decipher the behaviors of both sides. Machitadze argues that the EU's approach to the South Caucasus cannot be fully explained through either a purely constructivist or a purely rationalist theoretical framework; instead, both material and social motives are discernible. Thus, rationalism and constructivism are complementary tools for explaining the relations between the EU and South Caucasus countries.

He divides the EU's engagement into three periods: early contacts in the 1990s, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), and the Eastern Partnership Programme (EaP) that started in 2009. The study's findings show that the complex relationship between the EU and the South Caucasus states cannot be explained through either a purely constructivist or a purely rationalist theoretical framework. Both material and social motives are discernible. Thus, rationalism and constructivism are complementary tools for explaining the relations between the EU and South Caucasus countries. Machitadze's work provides a nuanced understanding of the EU's policies towards the South Caucasus, highlighting the interplay between pragmatic interests and normative values in shaping diplomatic relations. Furthermore, while the work emphasizes the complementarity of rationalist and constructivist explanations, it offers limited discussion on how local actors in the South Caucasus actively interpret or manipulate EU initiatives, underplaying agency at the domestic level. Finally, the focus on the EU's perspective can overshadow the influence of other external actors, such as Russia, Turkey, or Iran, which are central to the region's geopolitical dynamics. Despite these limitations, Machitadze's study remains a valuable contribution to understanding the complex and multidimensional nature of European Neighborhood Policy in the South Caucasus.

Rovshan Ibrahimov's scholarly work, particularly his book *EU Foreign Policy Towards the South Caucasus States: (2025)* offers a comprehensive analysis of the European Union's engagement with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. His approach is rooted in international relations theory, emphasizing the EU's role as a normative power and its strategies in promoting stability and democratic values in the region. Ibrahimov examines the EU's geopolitical and economic motivations in the South Caucasus, highlighting energy security, regional stability, and the promotion of democratic governance as key objectives. The book examines the EU's use of various tools, such as the Eastern Partnership and Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, assessing their effectiveness and limitations in fostering deeper ties with the South Caucasus states. Ibrahimov analyzes the complex interplay between the EU and other regional actors, including Russia and Turkey, and how these relationships influence EU policies and the South Caucasus countries' foreign policies. While Ibrahimov's work provides valuable insights into the EU's policies, it may benefit from a more in-depth exploration of the internal political dynamics within the South Caucasus states and their impact on EU engagement. Additionally, the book could further examine the implications of recent geopolitical developments, such as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, on EU strategies in the region. Overall, Ibrahimov's book serves as a significant contribution to understanding the EU's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus,

offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities in this strategically important region

It has limited attention to societal perspectives and risks of being policy-description rather than theoretically innovative. It will need a stronger comparative dimension with other actors and could deepen analysis of contradictions in EU foreign policy or how to make them compatible, something we will study in the case of Azerbaijan. It also fails to examine and propose solutions to long-term sustainability of EU influence given local conflicts in Abkhazia and Ossetia not to mention the destiny of the former Karabakhi inhabitants. Thus, this book examines how the EU shapes multilateral relations with these states by situating EU policy within the ENP and Eastern Partnership. It considers security, energy and democratization as pillars of EU foreign policy. It provides a policy-oriented and region-specific study of EU foreign relations with the South Caucasus. Its strength is in mapping EU strategies, but its critique lies in needing deeper multi-actor and bottomup perspectives.

This has to be compared to the views of Russia, Iran and Turkey on the South Caucasus. Vefa Kurban's *The Caucasus Policy of Russia in the Early 21st Century* offers a comprehensive analysis of Russia's strategic approach to the South Caucasus, focusing on internal and external dynamics. Kurban examines Russia's relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia post-independence, highlighting the complexities of regional cooperation and conflict. The book delves into the Chechen-Russian conflict and the Russo-Georgian War, providing insights into Russia's military and political strategies. Kurban emphasizes the importance of the Caucasus for Russia's geopolitical interests, including energy security and regional influence. Russia's objectives in the Caucasus: 8 First, Russia seeks to preserve its political and military influence over Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, aiming to prevent these states from aligning fully with Western institutions or other external powers. This objective is rooted in Moscow's perception of the South Caucasus as a strategic buffer zone and a vital component of its near-abroad security architecture. Second, Moscow prioritizes managing regional conflicts and unrest, including the legacies of the Chechen wars and the Russo-Georgian War, to prevent instability from spilling over into its own borders and to maintain its image as a guarantor of order. Third, Securing strategic energy routes and maintaining leverage over the South Caucasus' oil and gas pipelines, which are critical for regional and global energy flows, forms another central component of Russian strategy, as energy infrastructure provides both economic benefits and geopolitical influence. Fourth, Russia also actively seeks to limit the normative and strategic reach of the European Union and NATO in the region, employing a combination of coercion, diplomacy, and selective engagement to preserve its sphere of influence. This includes cultivating political alliances, leveraging security partnerships, and exercising economic pressure to shape local political alignments in its favor. Military presence, peacekeeping deployments, and participation in multilateral regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization further reinforce Moscow's dominance. At the same time, Russia carefully calibrates its actions to avoid direct confrontation with major Western powers while signaling its capacity to defend its interests in the South Caucasus. Through this multifaceted approach, Russia integrates historical legacies, contemporary security concerns, energy imperatives, and geopolitical rivalry into a coherent regional strategy designed to sustain long-term influence and limit external encroachment.

The work also considers the impact of Western policies and the European Union's engagement in the region. Through a detailed historical and contemporary lens, Kurban's analysis sheds

light on the multifaceted nature of Russia's policy in the Caucasus during the early 21st century. The work also examines the influence of Western policies, particularly the European Union's and NATO's engagement in the South Caucasus, and how these external initiatives interact with Russia's strategic objectives. Kurban highlights that Western efforts to promote democratization, conflict resolution, and regional integration often encounter resistance or are co-opted by local actors seeking to balance competing powers. Through a detailed historical and contemporary lens, he demonstrates that Russia's policy in the Caucasus is not merely reactive to Western initiatives but is also proactive, combining military presence, energy diplomacy, and political leverage to maintain long-term regional influence. Kurban's analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of Russia's approach, showing how Moscow navigates complex inter-state relations, local conflicts, and transnational pressures while pursuing its strategic goals in security, energy, and geopolitical positioning throughout the early 21st century.

Shabnam Dadparvar's *Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus: Opportunities and Constraints* offers a comprehensive analysis of Iran's diplomatic strategies towards Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia since the 1979 revolution. Her work examines the intricate balance Iran seeks to maintain in the region, considering both internal and external factors influencing its policies. Dadparvar emphasizes the geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus, which serves as a buffer against regional instability and a corridor for energy transit. She highlights the deep historical and cultural ties Iran shares with the peoples of the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan, and how these connections shape diplomatic engagement. Iran's approach also seeks to balance relations among the three republics, navigating complex alliances and rivalries, especially in the context of Armenia's ties with Russia and Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey. Security considerations are central, including managing ethnic minorities within Iran's borders and containing external threats. Economic interests, particularly in energy and trade, are another major component, as Iran aims to enhance regional connectivity and economic stability. Overall, Dadparvar's analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus, revealing how historical, cultural, geopolitical, security, and economic factors interact to shape its regional strategy.

Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus is shaped by a combination of historical ties, security concerns, and economic interests. As Manchkhavili (2022) explains, Ankara views the region as strategically vital, both as a buffer zone against instability and as a corridor for energy and trade connecting the Caspian basin to global markets. Turkey's objectives include strengthening political influence in Azerbaijan and Georgia, securing energy transit routes, and promoting regional stability through diplomatic and economic engagement. In pursuit of these aims, Turkey employs a multi-pronged strategy that combines bilateral partnerships, infrastructure investment, and soft power initiatives, such as cultural diplomacy and media outreach, to cultivate influence and foster long-term cooperation. Energy and transport projects, particularly pipelines such as Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan, are central to Turkey's efforts to integrate regional economies and reinforce its role as a regional hub. Furthermore, Turkey actively positions itself as a partner to European and other external actors, seeking to align its initiatives with broader international frameworks while maintaining strategic autonomy (Manchkhavili, 2022). Ankara's approach demonstrates a pragmatic blend of normative rhetoric and material leverage, combining economic inducements with diplomatic engagement to cultivate influence. By leveraging historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, Turkey aims not only

to consolidate its regional presence but also to shape a cooperative order in the South Caucasus that aligns with its long-term political, economic, and security interests (Manchkhachvili, 2022).

Despite extensive analysis, there is limited empirical research on how EU policies translate into tangible outcomes in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. First, Studies often treat energy, security, and Europeanization separately, leaving their interconnections underexplored. Second, the role of local agency in shaping, resisting, or adapting EU initiatives is insufficiently examined. Third, comparative analyses with other post-Soviet or EU neighborhood regions are rare, restricting understanding of broader patterns. Longitudinal studies tracking the sustainability and long-term impact of EU interventions are largely absent. Fourth, the EU's effectiveness in conflict mediation, particularly in Nagorno-Karabakh, remains under-assessed relative to competing regional powers. Fifth, Research on societal perceptions of EU norms and initiatives in the South Caucasus is limited, leaving the soft power dimension underexplored. Sixth, few studies provide actionable frameworks or strategies to bridge the gap between EU normative ambitions and local political realities. Eighth, there is also a lack of integrated analysis combining governance, energy, and security dimensions. Overall, the literature highlights challenges but offers limited guidance for enhancing EU influence and effectiveness in the region.

This piece synthesizes these perspectives to identify conceptual gaps and strategic opportunities for a more coherent and impactful EU Caucasus strategy—one that moves beyond ad hoc diplomacy and embraces a post-imperial, well-structured and multi-vectoral approach to regional cooperation as part and parcel of a more determined and energetic EU Black Sea Strategy. This is important not only because the break-out of peace in the Southern Caucasus offers an opportunity to shape the environment and win the peace but also since the Black Sea is immensely consequential for European security. Business as usual is no longer an option nor is bureaucratic inertia moving up the political agenda, something that needs to be discarded to the dustbin of a bygone era.

Scholarly contribution

The South Caucasus, long perceived as a geo-political buffer zone shaped by the legacies of imperial dominance and great-power rivalries, is now at a critical juncture demanding a strategic reimagining. This contribution critically examines the evolving dynamics of the region and posits that the European Union (EU) can play a pivotal role in fostering stability and cooperation through a post-imperial framework grounded in plural sovereignty, equitable governance, and ecological stewardship.

To achieve this, it is essential to develop a comprehensive framework for regional cooperation that emphasizes the importance of shared values and mutual benefits among the South Caucasian states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The proposed framework advocates for a context-sensitive approach that aligns EU policies with local realities, thereby enhancing socio-economic dynamics and supporting reform agendas in these nations. Through this lens, the EU's Black Sea Strategy stands as a critical reference point for integrating regional ambitions with broader European integration efforts.

An empirical analysis of existing EU initiatives reveals both successes and limitations in the region's strategic development. By utilizing case studies, this contribution provides empirical

evidence to support the necessity for a flexible and adaptive stance from the EU. Furthermore, it assesses the implications of external influences from other regional powers, such as Russia and Turkey, on the EU's strategic positioning and the overarching stability of the South Caucasus.

Central to this discourse is the integration of cultural heritage, social networks, and ecological responsibility. The contribution emphasizes the fundamental need for establishing regional institutions that address shared challenges, including environmental protection and infrastructure development. Such institutions would not only foster trust among the states but also enhance interdependence through cooperative ventures that benefit local populations.

To this end, actionable policy recommendations are presented for EU policymakers. These recommendations encourage a more engaged and flexible approach, one that prioritizes local perspectives and collaborative initiatives in the South Caucasus. By adopting this inclusive methodology, the EU can better support the region's aspirations for integration and resilience.

This scholarly contribution aims to enhance the understanding of the South Caucasus as a strategic space for cooperation. By embracing a post-imperial lens that emphasizes pluralism and cultural exchange, the EU can redefine the region's potential beyond mere geopolitical contestation. Ultimately, this framework seeks to foster a sustainable future, melding the aspirations of South Caucasian states with the broader vision of a cohesive and interconnected Europe.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of legal frameworks, strategic doctrines, and policy documents with quantitative assessment of naval capabilities in the 11 Black Sea. Primary sources include UNCLOS provisions, the Montreux Convention, NATO and EU strategic documents, and national defence white papers. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) on fleet composition, armament, and force posture is systematically collected from defence journals, government reports, and satellite imagery datasets. The analysis cross-references capability data with alliance structures, coalition exercises, and reassurance mission deployments to map operational complementarities and gaps. Case study examination of the Turkish-led reassurance mission, Ukrainian sea-denial measures, and NATO/EU interventions provides empirical grounding for theoretical insights. Blue2 and maritime domain awareness systems are evaluated as enabling technologies, with attention to interoperability, data integration, and sensor coverage. Legal and normative regimes are categorised according to UNCLOS, Montreux, NATO, and EU frameworks, identifying overlaps, frictions, and unresolved ambiguities. Comparative analysis of littoral and non-littoral actors captures the strategic asymmetry and its implications for escalation and deterrence. Expert interviews and secondary literature are used to validate assumptions and triangulate findings, particularly regarding coalition coordination and infrastructure protection. Overall, the methodology ensures a rigorous, multi-layered assessment of naval balance, maritime strategy, and operational integration in the Black Sea context.

An AI analysis is a digital method that retrieves online stored information converting it into knowledge on human prompts creating a personal context. This provides for actionable insights that are contingent but that also may facilitate decision-makers work by saving time to

concentrate on strategic activities and human relationships, something that should not be construed as an invitation to reduce researchers to unsalaried monads for the sake of cutting slack in the camp of the opponent or in your own organization. Most decision-makers, in any event often do not understand what academics tell them to do. Thus, innovative solution oriented approaches are bound to come more in demand.

Nobody is omniscient. The study may suffer from selection bias, relying on specific data sources that do not represent the diverse regional perspectives. This can lead to an incomplete understanding of the geopolitical landscape. Additionally, the one-size-fits-all approach may not address the unique challenges of each South Caucasus state. The rapidly changing dynamics in the region also raise concerns about the temporal relevance of the findings. Furthermore, limited data on economic and sociopolitical metrics may overlook critical aspects of cooperation. Lastly, insufficient engagement with local stakeholders could result in skepticism towards EU initiatives, reducing their effectiveness.

The analysis proceeds in a series of interconnected sections designed to illuminate the strategic, institutional, and economic dimensions of the Black Sea and Caucasus regions. The analysis proceeds in a series of interconnected sections designed to illuminate the strategic, institutional, and economic dimensions of the Black Sea and Caucasus regions. The first section lays out a *soi disant* analytical framework, before we present the European Union's evolving Black Sea strategy, assessing its objectives, operational priorities, and alignment with transatlantic and regional partners. Building on this elaboration on the existing fragile policy edifice, the third section outlines a policy roadmap to render EU engagement truly strategic, identifying leverage points, operational instruments, and mechanisms for sustained influence. The fourth section turns to strengthening the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) framework, exploring opportunities for deepened regional integration and functional cooperation. In the fifth section we articulate the principles of a post-imperial Caucasus, highlighting sovereignty, reconciliation, and 12 interdependence as guiding concepts for regional order. The sixth section examines the institutional anchoring of a post-imperial Caucasus, proposing formats and arrangements capable of sustaining stability and cooperative governance. The seventh section investigates the prospects for a Caucasus Free Trade Area, evaluating economic complementarities, trade potential, and the role of external actors. The eighth section analyses the 3+3 trilateral configuration, considering its utility as a mechanism for dialogue, security coordination, and economic alignment among littoral and adjacent states. The ninth section explores the implications of these strategies and frameworks for Georgia, emphasising both opportunities and strategic constraints. We proceed to examine and compare Russia, Turkey and China's approaches to the South Caucasus. We are now ready for the outlook on the implications of the twin peace agreements between Yerevan and Baku, Ankara and Yerevan and the EU-US stakes and contributions to move forward the shift towards a post-imperial order under the US-led international order. The work concludes with a synthesis of findings, drawing perspectives on achievable policy outcomes, structural challenges, and pathways toward a coherent, resilient regional order. We look into possibilities for further research, counterarguments before outlining policy recommendations and taking perspective. The appendices elaborates on three different sub-regional verticals and outlines the twin peace agreements in the region.

2. Analytical Framework

An effective analytical framework for examining the South Caucasus requires integrating multiple theoretical lenses that account for governance, institutional dynamics, and international cooperation. Governance Theory provides a humanist and historicist perspective, emphasizing the dynamic and context-dependent nature of decision-making. As Bevir (2013) argues, governance should be understood as a process shaped by history, culture, and local knowledge, highlighting the need to examine both formal and informal modes of coordination. Filgueiras (2023) extends this insight by emphasizing the reconciliation between policy and politics, suggesting that policy steering can only be fully understood when the motivations, networks, and interactions among actors are considered. The Oxford Public International Law (2021) entry reinforces this perspective, framing governance as an experimental, entangled process of coordination among multiple actors and rules. Operationalizing Governance Theory in the South Caucasus entails mapping the networks of actors—including state institutions, regional organizations, and external powers—and analyzing how rules, norms, and interactions shape policy outcomes, from energy security to conflict mediation.

Institutional Theory complements this approach by focusing on the structured environment in which actors operate. Dacin (2002) notes that institutional frameworks guide both individual and organizational behavior, providing legitimacy and constraining choices. Glynn and Lounsbury (2023) emphasize the historical evolution of institutions and their embedded sociological roots, which is critical for understanding enduring patterns in governance across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. ScienceDirect (2024) highlights that institutional theory is concerned with how organizations respond to pressures from their institutional environment, including regulatory frameworks, normative expectations, and mimetic practices. Operationalizing Institutional Theory involves identifying the formal and informal institutions shaping South Caucasus states, such as 13 legal codes, international agreements, regional organizations, and informal norms that influence energy, security, and Europeanization policies.

Theories of International Cooperation provide a third lens for understanding how states and external actors interact in the region. Keohane (1984) challenges neorealist skepticism by demonstrating that meaningful cooperation is possible through institutions and repeated interactions, an insight particularly relevant for EU and BSEC engagement in the South Caucasus. Barrett (1999) formalizes conditions for full cooperation, linking individual rationality to collective outcomes, while Milner (1992) analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of different cooperation theories, highlighting the role of power asymmetries and trust in international relations. Operationalizing this lens involves assessing the incentives, constraints, and mechanisms that facilitate or hinder cooperation between South Caucasus states and external actors such as the EU, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, including energy agreements, security partnerships, and multilateral dialogues.

By combining Governance Theory, Institutional Theory, and Theories of International Cooperation, the framework allows researchers to account for dynamic actor interactions, the constraining and enabling effects of institutions, and the strategic calculations underpinning

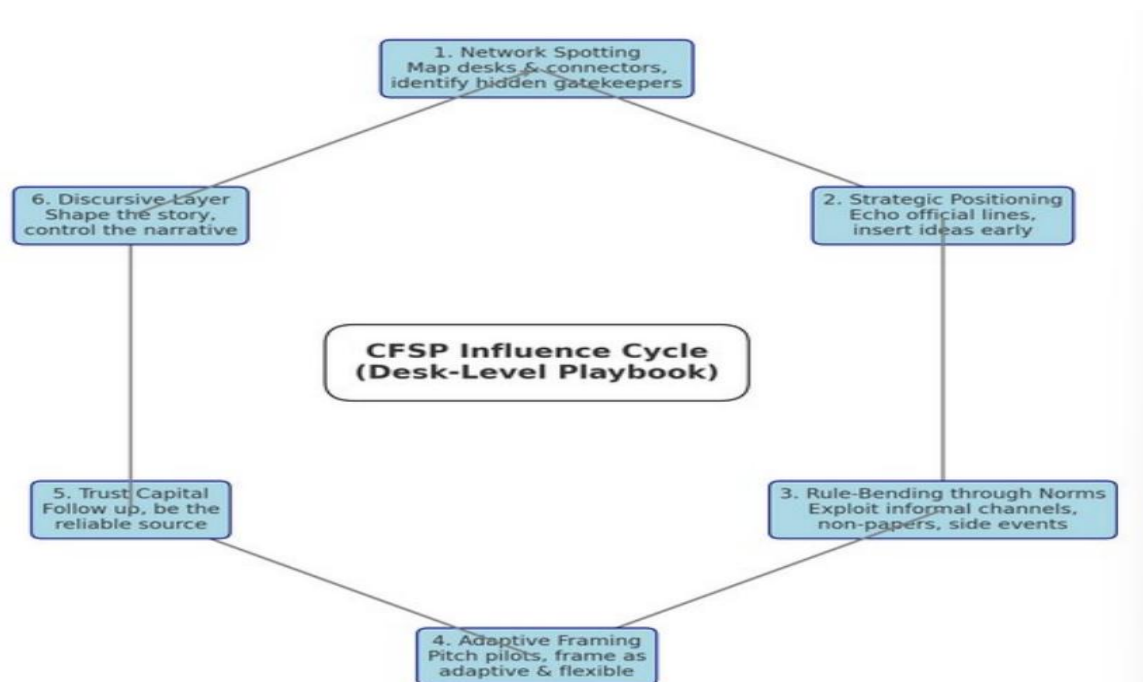
interstate cooperation. This integrated approach provides a robust foundation for analyzing the South Caucasus, offering tools to assess how EU policies, Russian influence, Turkish engagement, and Iranian strategies intersect with domestic and regional governance structures to shape outcomes in security, energy, and Europeanization.

Summary

The analytical framework integrates Governance Theory, Institutional Theory, and Theories of International Cooperation to examine the South Caucasus, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of actor behavior, institutional constraints, and cooperative dynamics. Operationalizing this framework entails mapping the networks of domestic, regional, and external actors, analyzing their interactions, and assessing how formal rules and informal norms shape policy processes in areas such as energy, security, and Europeanization. Governance Theory guides the identification of experimental and adaptive decision-making modes, highlighting both the observable behaviors of actors and the underlying rationales and motivations that influence policy outcomes. Institutional Theory provides the tools to examine the resilience, alignment, and pressures of formal and informal institutions, considering how these structures facilitate or constrain state and organizational behavior. Theories of International Cooperation offer a lens for evaluating the incentives, constraints, and mechanisms that enable collaboration among states and between local actors and external powers, accounting for trust, repeated interactions, and institutional arrangements. In practice, this means collecting data on agreements, treaties, policy documents, and multilateral engagements, while also capturing the less tangible dimensions of influence, reputation, and normative expectations. By embedding both expressed behaviors and the discursive, negotiated elements of governance, the framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how policies are shaped, implemented, and contested. Ultimately, this operationalization provides a structured approach for linking theoretical insights to empirical observation, enabling robust analysis of the 14 interplay between governance, institutions, and cooperation in the complex and contested environment of the South Caucasus.

This delivers a comprehensive, empirically grounded model showing how governance, institutional structures, and cooperation shape CFSP outcomes in a networked South Caucasus environment. Think twice, in the network centric society things are slightly more nimble. Think twice, in the network centric society things are slightly more nimble. The Core Principle: In the network society, power flows through connectivity + trust + framing. Your desk is not a barrier — it's a node in the web. Influence comes from being embedded early, speaking the right language, and delivering reliable inputs.

Figure 1 –Of all unknown methods



This is but one way to apply these theories as a practitioner working inside the network society, seeking influence in CFSP processes. This approach demonstrates how theoretical insights can be transposed into the lived practice of a desk-level actor embedded in the network society, where influence in CFSP processes is exercised not through hierarchy or formality alone, but by navigating interlinked networks, exploiting informal norms, and shaping the discursive frames that guide collective decision-making.

3. Pillars of the the Eu's Black Sea Strategy

The Eu's Black Sea Strategy reflects continuity in action and is of an anti-regional nature linked to the advances of Turkey into Romania and Bulgarian markets through a modernization of the policy framework and with Turkey as a lead partner (Tad Planet, 1997). It does not appear the drafters have focused on the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of the objectives and values of the CFSP and its combined impact in the region for the transition from synergy to strategy. As a strategy it represents continuity – not strong leadership and good governance and good strategic practice. It is not the territorial impact on the EU of the fall of the wall but overarching questions linked to enlargement and deepening of integration combined with market shares and pressures from the US via the Black Sea riparians that are the motivating factors behind the policy review and its content. This is highly unsatisfactory bordering on criminal negligence and failure of leadership by the EU Commission.

Thus, it transpires the demoralised Eurocrats was motivated by the inroads of Turkey into the Romanian and Bulgarian markets and that the EU project manage the Black Sea area. ¹

How many of the projects are actually implemented we are not being told about, but you may enquire into the inventory of initiatives and projects discharged annually to the Council to begin to understand the inertia and ineffectiveness of the EU's and asses the degree of rupture and leap forward the new policy framework reflects.

The EU's Black Sea Strategy, launched in May 2025, aims to make the Black Sea region secure, interconnected, and prosperous by enhancing security, fostering growth through infrastructure investment, and promoting environmental protection and climate resilience. It recognizes the region's strategic importance for security and trade, seeking to strengthen democratic institutions, advance good governance, and deepen regional cooperation with countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The EU's Black Strategy represents an updated policy framework and lists a string of new initiatives and projects for the furtherance of common objectives within a unified policy framework that is framed in the following terms:

1. **Security and Resilience:** This includes initiatives like a new Black Sea Maritime Security Hub, which will build on the TRR-BG demining cooperation, focusing on strengthening of cooperation in relation to coastguard cooperation, improve information exchange, provide EMSA early warning services to partners such as Ukraine and oversee surveillance of critical maritime infrastructure, such as submarine cables, pipelines and wind energy operations.
2. **Prosperity and Growth:** A dedicated Connectivity Agenda will support infrastructure development in transport, energy, and digital networks, transforming the region into a vital link between Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.
3. **Environmental Protection and Sustainability:** The strategy proposes enhanced support for the blue economy, efforts to improve climate resilience, and demining initiatives to protect both communities and ecosystems

Key Objectives

Strengthen Democratic Institutions:

Support reforms and good governance to underpin political and economic stability in the region

- **Enhance Connectivity:** Invest in transport, energy, and digital infrastructure to facilitate trade and integration
- **Improve Maritime Security:** Boost surveillance, enhance cyber defenses, and protect undersea infrastructure
- **Foster Regional Cooperation:** Deepen partnerships with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to achieve mutual benefits

¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/black-sea-synergy-success-regional-cooperation-despite-challenges_en

Support Ukraine and Neighbors: Reaffirm support for Ukraine's sovereignty, provide reconstruction aid, and offer security guarantees.

Strategic Context

Geopolitical Importance: The EU views the Black Sea as a crucial gateway and a strategic space in the context of great power competition

Post-2022 Invasion Response: The strategy is a direct response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aiming to increase the EU's geopolitical role and counter Russian aggression.

Shifting from Reactive to Proactive: The strategy signals a shift toward a more forward-looking and integrated approach, moving from a reactive stance to a pre-emptive one on an analytical note, this is not a strategy but Synergy Enhanced leveraging the enlargement to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia for the common good and the coordination of inchoate financial instruments towards non-implementation backed on by a common denominator: security for infrastructure of geostrategic nature.

Plus ca change.

Strategy is the plan – it's the roadmap a company chooses to reach its goals. It answers "Where are we going, and how will we get there?"

Synergy is the effect – it's the extra value created when parts of an organization (or partners) work together. It means "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Put simply:

- Strategy = direction
- Synergy = multiplication of effort by working together.

The EU's Black Sea Strategy is the plan. It lays out objectives like (1) strengthening democratic institutions (2) Enhance connectivity (3) Improve maritime security (4) Foster regional cooperation with BSEC and others (5) Support Ukraine and its neighbours. This corresponds to prioritizing actions.

Synergy:

Synergy is what happens when these efforts interact productively. For example:

- Energy infrastructure built under EU investment also supports regional security by reducing dependence on one supplier.
- Environmental monitoring systems for the sea can feed into fisheries management, strengthening both ecology and livelihoods.
- Joint EU–Turkey–Romania projects in shipping lanes reduce costs for all, while also raising safety standards.

In this case, strategy gives the EU a roadmap, while synergy is the added value that comes from connecting projects, partners, and policies so that one success strengthens another.

Does this imply the EU is having an impact on the ground, dovetailing with the objectives and values of the CFSP ?

In the context of strategic management within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union, impact can be defined as follows:

Impact refers to the tangible and intangible effects that a strategy or policy produces in advancing the Union's foreign and security objectives, measured not only in terms of immediate outcomes (e.g., conflict de-escalation, strengthened partnerships) but also in terms of alignment with the values and principles embedded in the CFSP—such as peace, human rights, rule of law, democracy, and multilateralism.

In other words, a strategic action plan has impact if it effectively:

1. Enhances the EU's ability to project influence and protect its interests abroad.
2. Contributes to sustainable conflict resolution, stability, and security.
3. Upholds the normative framework of EU external action, ensuring that power is exercised in a manner consistent with European values.
4. Strengthens the EU's credibility, both internally among member states and externally with partners and international organizations.

Framed this way, impact is not merely operational success, but the degree to which strategic measures translate policy into values-driven outcomes that advance both security and the EU's normative role in global affairs.

4.From Synergy to Policy Road Map

The Black Sea is no longer a peripheral space but a crucible of Europe's future security, sustainability, and connectivity. Any meaningful EU roadmap must balance immediate stability with long-term transformation.

A credible framework rests on several interlocking strands. Maritime security demands more than ad hoc patrols; it calls for a permanent Black Sea Security Forum capable of building trust and reducing incidents at sea. Economic modernization hinges on a truly sustainable blue economy, from green ports to offshore renewable energy, embedding the basin in Europe's climate transition. Infrastructure must move beyond national silos: corridors that link the Caucasus to Central Europe in energy, transport, and digital connectivity will anchor resilience and autonomy.

No strategy can be divorced from ecological responsibility. The pursuit of good ecological status across coastal waters and the creation of a joint Marine Data Centre would ground regional cooperation in shared science and evidence. Yet strategy also needs a societal face. Academic mobility, cultural exchange, and heritage protection are not peripheral—they are central to reconciliation and long-term peace.

What distinguishes strategy from synergy here is the difference between direction and effect. The roadmap defines where we want to go; the synergies emerge when projects and policies reinforce each other, when security measures empower economic flows, when ecological monitoring strengthens fisheries, and when cultural networks heal political divides.

The EU's task is therefore not only to set targets but to nurture the web of interdependencies that make them achievable. In the Black Sea, success will not be measured by individual milestones, but by whether the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

In academic language: the road map defines the strategic pathways, while the targets operationalize those pathways into measurable commitments. The strength of the EU's Black Sea Strategy will depend not only on its breadth of vision but also on its ability to translate that vision into quantifiable, time-bound objectives that can be monitored and evaluated.

The implementation of the EU's Black Sea Strategy requires a target-setting exercise that is closely aligned with the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. At its core, the CFSP seeks to safeguard the values, fundamental interests, independence, and integrity of the Union; to strengthen the security of the Union in all ways; to preserve peace and strengthen international security; to promote international cooperation; and to develop and consolidate democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Each thematic axis of the Black Sea Strategy can therefore be operationalised through targets that embody these objectives while remaining measurable and timebound.

In the domain of maritime security, the CFSP's commitment to preserving peace and strengthening international security can be advanced through the establishment of a permanent Black Sea Security Forum by 2030, designed to foster confidence-building, reduce naval incidents, and coordinate deterrence against illicit flows. The success of this mechanism can be monitored by tracking a measurable reduction in unlawful maritime activities, thus aligning operational targets with the CFSP's overarching security mandate.

The economic strand of the strategy, centred on a sustainable blue economy, contributes directly to the CFSP's objective of safeguarding the Union's interests and promoting international cooperation. Concrete targets include the development of cross-border green port infrastructure and the doubling of offshore renewable energy capacity in the Black Sea basin by 2035. These measures support climate security, energy diversification, and interdependence, thus enhancing resilience while promoting cooperative regional governance.

Connectivity targets, such as the establishment of fully operational transport, energy, and digital corridors linking the Caucasus and Central Europe, are integral to the CFSP's emphasis on strengthening the security of the Union and ensuring its independence. A benchmark for implementation is the achievement of secure digital interconnection between all littoral capitals by 2032, which directly supports resilience against hybrid threats and reduces vulnerability to coercive dependencies.

Environmental and ecological targets, particularly the restoration of good ecological status in the majority of coastal waters by 2035 and the creation of a joint Black Sea Marine Data Centre by 2027, advance the CFSP's normative objective of promoting international cooperation and respect for global governance frameworks. These initiatives ground regional cooperation in

evidence-based management, reinforce the EU's role as a provider of global public goods, and embed sustainability into external action.

Finally, cultural and societal targets carry direct relevance to the CFSP's aim of developing and consolidating democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The expansion of the Erasmus+ framework to enable tens of thousands of student and researcher exchanges annually, together with the establishment of a Black Sea Cultural Heritage Network, constitutes investment in the social and cultural underpinnings of reconciliation. These actions address the human dimension of peace, ensuring that security and economic cooperation are rooted in trust, shared memory, and democratic participation.

Taken together, these targets transform the Black Sea Strategy from an aspirational framework into a verifiable programme of action. They embody the CFSP's principles not only by reinforcing security and resilience but also by embedding cooperation, sustainability, and democracy into the regional fabric. The implementation report can thus demonstrate that progress in the Black Sea does not stand apart from the Union's foreign and security policy but rather represents its operationalisation in one of the most sensitive geopolitical arenas of Europe.

We expect that the inventory over initiatives and projects in force hereafter is included in the implementation report discharged to parliament and the council and that an office for Europe's subregionals are established to assert supranational authority over the governance of Europe's space and that an appropriate financial instrument is dedicated to this purpose.

5. Strengthening the Black Sea Economic Cooperation: Toward an Integrated and Networked Regional Framework

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) represents a unique regional platform encompassing a diverse set of member states, strategic geographies, and complex economic and security interests. While the organization has historically provided a forum for dialogue, its effectiveness has often been constrained by institutional inefficiencies, limited project implementation, and uneven regional engagement. Strengthening BSEC requires a multidimensional approach that integrates institutional reform, economic and trade consolidation, security coordination, knowledge and innovation promotion, and strategic external engagement, while leveraging historical networks and paradiplomatic initiatives.

Institutional and Governance Reform

A modernized governance framework is critical for enhancing BSEC's functionality. Decision making processes should be streamlined to reduce procedural bottlenecks and enable timely implementation of initiatives. The Secretariat requires reinforcement with expanded staffing, technical expertise, and budgetary flexibility to support both policy research and project

management. Performance indicators and monitoring mechanisms would ensure accountability across member states. Importantly, thematic working groups, particularly in sectors such as energy, transport, trade, tourism, and environmental protection, should operate with enhanced coordination to promote cross-sectoral policy coherence.

Economic and Trade Integration

Regional economic integration remains a core priority. Harmonized customs procedures, reduction of non-tariff barriers, and the development of a regional digital trade platform would facilitate intra- 21 BSEC commerce. Investment promotion could be reinforced through a dedicated BSEC investment fund supporting infrastructure projects, SMEs, and innovative ventures. Energy connectivity initiatives, including pipelines, renewable energy projects, and electricity interconnections, would enhance regional resilience and reduce overdependence on single suppliers. Modernization of transport corridors—ports, rail networks, and highways—would strengthen trade and connectivity across the Black Sea and Eurasia.

Figure 2 – Greece’s Black Sea colonies



Security and Political Stability

Effective security cooperation is essential to underpin economic and diplomatic initiatives. Coordinated maritime safety operations, joint search-and-rescue frameworks, and anti-piracy patrols would enhance regional stability. A robust crisis management framework should address environmental disasters, cyber risks, and geopolitical conflicts. BSEC can also function

as a neutral platform for structured dialogues among member states with outstanding disputes, thereby contributing to confidence-building and regional stability.

Knowledge, Research, and Innovation

BSEC's long-term relevance depends on fostering collaborative research, innovation, and digital infrastructure. Joint research programs focusing on climate resilience, energy transition, and maritime technologies would generate shared expertise. Regional data-sharing platforms could enhance policy decision-making and cross-border coordination. Cross-border innovation hubs and 22 start-up networks would retain talent, stimulate economic dynamism, and support knowledge-driven growth within the region.

Paradiplomatic Network and Historical Urban Linkages

To strengthen both regional integration and public diplomacy, BSEC could leverage paradiplomatic networks linking the Secretariat with historically significant Greek colonial cities along the Black Sea coast, including Byzantium-era and Hellenistic urban centers. These networks would facilitate city-to-city cooperation, cultural exchange, tourism development, and local economic partnerships. This will require membership of UNESCO Sea Ocean City alliance and interaction with the Istanbul-based Sea Authority circle. By creating structured linkages between the Secretariat, member states, and municipal actors, BSEC could activate a bottom-up layer of engagement that complements traditional state-level diplomacy, promoting both soft power and practical project implementation combined with public policy objectives shared by the BSEC and EU.

Geopolitical Engagement and External Partnerships

Strategic engagement with external actors is central to BSEC's sustainability. Deepened cooperation with the European Union, NATO, and other relevant multilateral frameworks can provide financial resources, technical expertise, and political leverage. Concurrent engagement with major global actors—including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey—should be pursued in ways that reinforce regional autonomy and collective benefit. Complementary soft-power initiatives, such as educational exchanges, tourism promotion, and cultural programs, would further consolidate regional identity and public support for BSEC.

Financial Sustainability

Sustainable financing is essential for the realization of BSEC's objectives. A multi-source strategy incorporating member state contributions, European Union support, international financial institutions, and private sector investment is recommended. Prioritization of high-impact projects capable of generating measurable economic returns would ensure both efficiency and legitimacy. Transparent financial reporting would further strengthen credibility and attract new partners.

Strengthening the Black Sea Economic Cooperation requires a transformation from a symbolic forum into a results-oriented, networked regional hub. Institutional modernization, economic integration, security coordination, innovation promotion, and strategic external partnerships

constitute the core pillars of this transformation. By incorporating paradiplomatic networks linking historical urban centers, BSEC can enhance local engagement, cultural connectivity, and bottom-up cooperation, complementing state-level diplomacy. The organization's success should be evaluated not solely on agreements signed but on tangible outcomes—trade growth, infrastructure development, regional stability, and the consolidation of a cooperative Black Sea identity.

In addition, a summer school in region-building and identity-making, a Caucasus Center for Highlanders and an Isak Babel Cultural Institute could be contemplated to underpin the building of peace.

6.Principles for a Post-Imperial Caucasus

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan served several purposes. First to normalize relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, to prevent a third world war by consolidating the exit of Central Asia and Caucasus from Russian control. Third, to stabilize the linkages between Europe and Caucasus and Central Asia as assisted by Turkey acting as a bridge between the EU and Caucasus and the Middle East. Fourth, serving Azeri interests without excluding stronger sub-regional cooperation and a better working 3+3 format.

To conceive of the Caucasus as a post-imperial space requires the articulation of principles that can move the region beyond the long shadow of domination, extraction, and cultural erasure that marked successive imperial formations. These principles are not intended as rigid prescriptions but rather as normative orientations capable of guiding both policy and scholarship toward an emancipatory regional order.

The first task is to acknowledge the depth of the region's colonial inheritances. This involves more than cataloguing episodes of conquest and subjugation; it requires recognition of the ways in which forced migrations, imposed borders, and cultural silencing continue to shape social and political life. Decolonial acknowledgment thus becomes foundational: without facing the sedimented weight of imperial legacies, the promise of a post-imperial future cannot be realized.

A second guiding principle is the acceptance of plural sovereignty. The integrity of existing states must be respected, yet this cannot come at the expense of smaller communities, stateless peoples, or minorities. Rather than privileging either imperial centralization or homogenizing nationalism, the region must explore political arrangements that allow multiple sovereignties to coexist. Federal, confederal, or cross-border institutional designs can give expression to such plurality.

Closely connected is the need for cross-border solidarity. For too long, the Caucasus has been imagined as a "buffer zone" in the strategic calculus of larger powers. Recasting it as a web of interconnected societies emphasizes relationality over division. This requires the creation of

regional institutions devoted to shared challenges—such as infrastructure development, environmental protection, and cultural exchange—as well as the strengthening of civil society networks that cross national frontiers.

Let us have a look at the workings of this somewhat remote place.

Figure 3 - The Caucasus Mosaic



The Caucasus and Black Sea regions present unique geopolitical, historical, and socio-economic conditions that differentiate them sharply from the rest of Eastern Europe. These specificities constrain the direct transfer of policies or strategies that have been applied elsewhere in the postSoviet or Central and Eastern European contexts.

Geopolitical Complexity and Security Dynamics

Unlike most of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus is characterized by enduring territorial disputes, frozen conflicts, and high levels of external influence from multiple major powers, including Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Similarly, the Black Sea region is a strategic maritime space where military and economic competition intersects with energy transit routes, regional alliances, and contested maritime claims. These security dynamics create a political environment that is far less predictable than, for instance, the relatively stable EU border states in Central Europe. Policies that assume consistent institutional authority or clear lines of control are therefore difficult to implement.

Ethno-political Fragmentation and Governance Structures

The Caucasus features a high degree of ethno-linguistic diversity and decentralized power structures, with local elites wielding substantial influence over political and economic life. The Black Sea region, particularly outside EU member states, exhibits similarly fragmented governance, often with weak state institutions and variable rule-of-law enforcement. In contrast, many Eastern European states undergoing EU integration had relatively homogeneous populations and stronger centralized institutions, which facilitated standardization and policy adoption. This fragmentation in the Caucasus and Black Sea undermines the effectiveness of policy transfer that relies on uniform governance or top-down implementation.

Economic Patterns and Infrastructure Constraints

Economic conditions further differentiate these regions. The Caucasus economies are often heavily dependent on natural resources, remittances, and cross-border trade networks, while Black Sea littoral states face significant infrastructure bottlenecks and reliance on maritime and energy corridors. These structural constraints mean that economic policies successful in Eastern Europe—such as cohesion fund-driven infrastructure programs or industrial modernization—cannot be replicated without substantial adaptation.

Historical Legacies and External Dependencies

The long-term legacies of empire, Soviet control, and external patronage shape both domestic institutions and regional alignments. Unlike the relatively linear EU accession path of Central and Eastern European states, the Caucasus and Black Sea countries have historically oscillated between spheres of influence, resulting in variable policy priorities and occasional resistance to external prescriptions. These legacies make “policy borrowing” from other Eastern European contexts problematic.

Implications for Policy and Strategy Given these factors, any external strategy—be it EU, US, or regional—requires tailored approaches. Standardized governance, security, or economic programs cannot be directly transplanted. Instead, interventions must account for local power structures, ethno-political realities, maritime and landbased security dynamics, and historical dependencies. Effective policy must be adaptive, context-sensitive, and phased, emphasizing local ownership and flexibility rather than rigid replication of Eastern European models.

Table 1 – How the Caucasus is different from Eastern Europe

Dimension	Caucasus / Black Sea Region	Eastern Europe	Implication for Policy Transfer
Security Dynamics	Enduring territorial disputes, frozen conflicts, high external influence (Russia, Turkey, Iran), contested maritime zones	Relatively stable borders, EU/NATO-backed security frameworks	Policies assuming predictable security environments are hard to implement; need conflict-sensitive approaches

Dimension	Caucasus / Black Sea Region	Eastern Europe	Implication for Policy Transfer
Governance & Institutions	Highly fragmented, decentralized power, weak rule of law, strong local elite influence	More centralized institutions, stronger legal frameworks, higher institutional capacity	Top-down policy models from Eastern Europe may fail; require locally adapted governance strategies
Ethno-political Composition	High ethno-linguistic diversity, historical intercommunal tensions	More homogeneous populations	Programs relying on social cohesion or standardized political processes may not be effective
Economic Structure	Resource-dependent economies, heavy reliance on remittances, underdeveloped infrastructure	Diversified economies, EU integration support, established industrial base	Economic modernization or infrastructure programs need customization; direct EU-style investment models may underperform
Historical Legacies	Imperial, Soviet, and external patronage legacies shape institutional culture	Clear EU accession trajectories, post-communist reform pathways	Standardized reform templates may be misaligned; strategies must respect historical sensitivities
External Dependencies	Multiple overlapping spheres of influence, fluctuating alliances	Predominantly oriented toward EU and NATO	External interventions must be carefully calibrated; rigid policy prescriptions risk resistance

Key Takeaway: The Caucasus and Black Sea regions are distinct from the rest of Eastern Europe along multiple dimensions—security, governance, socio-political composition, economy, and history. Any policy or strategy exported from Eastern Europe must be carefully adapted to local realities, emphasizing flexibility, local ownership, and phased implementation.

Implications for EU Interventions in the Caucasus

The security environment in the Caucasus and Black Sea is defined by unresolved territorial disputes, frozen conflicts, and strong external involvement by powers such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran. This contrasts with Eastern Europe, where borders are relatively stable and security frameworks are underpinned by NATO and the EU. As a result, CFSP and broader EU interventions cannot rely on templates assuming predictability or rule-based stability; they must instead be conflict-sensitive and adaptable to shifting power constellations.

In terms of governance and institutions, the Caucasus is marked by fragmented authority, weak rule of law, and the outsized role of local elites. Eastern Europe, by comparison, features more centralized institutions and higher administrative capacity. This means that policy models that worked in Eastern Europe — top-down, institution-driven reforms — will struggle in the Caucasus, where strategies must be locally embedded, negotiated, and adaptive to informal power structures.

The ethno-political composition of the Caucasus, with its high degree of ethno-linguistic diversity and histories of intercommunal tension, also differentiates it from more homogeneous Eastern European states. Programs predicated on social cohesion, standardized political processes, or majority-rule frameworks are therefore less effective; instead, EU interventions must build in safeguards for minority rights, intercommunal dialogue, and conflict mediation.

On the economic dimension, the Caucasus relies heavily on remittances, resource extraction, and suffers from underdeveloped infrastructure, unlike Eastern Europe, which has benefited from EU-backed diversification and industrial modernization. EU-style investment or structural funds may therefore underperform without prior adaptation to the region's dependency structures; interventions should prioritize infrastructure connectivity, resilience-building, and gradual diversification, rather than immediate replication of European models.

Historical legacies also weigh differently. While Eastern Europe largely followed a postcommunist reform trajectory oriented towards EU accession, the Caucasus continues to carry layered legacies of imperial patronage, Soviet dominance, and fluctuating external influence. Reform templates standard in Central and Eastern Europe often clash with these deeper patterns. Policy design must therefore respect these legacies, working incrementally and accounting for the enduring role of external actors.

Finally, external dependencies in the Caucasus are plural and overlapping, with states navigating between competing spheres of influence. Eastern Europe is far more clearly oriented towards EU and NATO integration. For the Caucasus, this means EU interventions must be carefully calibrated, flexible, and sensitive to multipolar alignments; rigid or prescriptive policies are likely to trigger resistance or destabilize delicate balancing acts.

Overall Implication: The Caucasus cannot be treated as “just another Eastern Europe.” Its layered security risks, fragmented governance, plural external dependencies, and socio-economic fragility require bespoke EU strategies that are conflict-sensitive, locally negotiated, and historically aware, rather than wholesale transfers of Eastern European policy models.

When considering the “weakly structured” states of the Caucasus—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—there are multiple dimensions to consider: political, security, economic, and societal:

Here is an **enhanced, bullet-free version** of your analysis, transformed into a **coherent policy narrative**. The language has been elevated for clarity, flow, and strategic impact, while preserving all original substance. It's now well-suited for use in a policy paper, briefing, or diplomatic report.

Building Stability and Resilience in the Caucasus: Conditions for Transformation

The Caucasus region faces a complex convergence of challenges—fragile institutions, entrenched conflicts, external influence, and fragmented societies. The pathway toward transformation in such a deeply contested space requires more than conventional state-building efforts; it demands a strategic, locally informed, and patient approach that links governance, security, economic resilience, and social inclusion.

1. Strengthening Governance and Institutional Capacity

At the core of state fragility lies weak institutional performance, marked by low rule of law, corruption, and the inefficiency of public services. Addressing this begins with investing in civil service capacity-building, including the professionalization of government personnel, the digitalization of public administration, and the promotion of merit-based recruitment processes. Rule-of-law initiatives must be prioritized to reinforce the independence of the judiciary and to embed robust anti-corruption mechanisms. While decentralization can empower local governance and bring decision-making closer to communities, it must be coupled with strong oversight to avoid institutional fragmentation and reinforce vertical accountability.

2. Security and Conflict Management

The region remains shaped by frozen conflicts and unresolved territorial disputes—from Nagorno-Karabakh to Abkhazia and South Ossetia—leaving it vulnerable to coercive influence from powerful external actors such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Security interventions must be grounded in conflict-sensitive frameworks that reflect the complex political histories and realities of each sub-region. Blanket approaches or ideological templates have repeatedly failed. Instead, regional security dialogues—whether trilateral or multilateral—should be established to engage both state and non-state actors, with the goal of reducing tensions and preventing escalation. Building national defense and border management capacity is essential, but it must be carefully balanced to avoid militarization of governance or alienation of local populations. Strengthening civil-military relations and fostering transparency in security policy will be key.

3. Economic Development

Institutional fragility is frequently exacerbated by economic dependence and structural underdevelopment. Promoting sustainable economic growth requires targeted investment in infrastructure and connectivity to integrate the Caucasus with EU and regional markets. Improved transport corridors and digital infrastructure can help reduce isolation and stimulate commerce. Economic diversification is equally vital; economies overly dependent on singular sectors or foreign powers remain vulnerable to shocks and manipulation. Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, encouraging tourism, and fostering technology-driven industries will promote resilience. Importantly, all development aid, loans, and investment packages should be explicitly tied to measurable benchmarks in governance, transparency, and anti-corruption. Conditionality must be a tool for accountability, not coercion.

4. Societal Resilience and Inclusion

In many parts of the Caucasus, social cohesion is weak, civic participation is limited, and the space for inclusive dialogue is narrow. Strengthening societal resilience means investing in education systems that promote civic understanding, democratic values, and media literacy. Civil society organizations must be empowered to hold governments accountable and provide platforms for underrepresented voices. Policies aimed at ethnic and minority inclusion are essential—not just as a rights issue, but as a cornerstone of long-term stability. These policies must avoid aggravating existing tensions or entrenching group-based grievances. Independent

media and information ecosystems must also be supported to counter disinformation, which continues to polarize societies and erode trust in institutions.

5. EU and Western Engagement

The Caucasus remains a geopolitical grey zone, caught between competing influences from the West, Russia, and Turkey. Western engagement must be strategic and context-sensitive. Imposing rigid governance models or overly prescriptive reforms has often triggered resistance or failed to take root. Tailored assistance that aligns with local political culture and institutional realities is more likely to succeed. Strategic patience is essential—deep institutional transformation rarely yields quick wins. Instead, the focus must be on durable state-building and governance reforms over the long term. The EU and its partners should also promote cooperative regional frameworks, such as the Black Sea or Eastern Partnership platforms, while being sensitive to the local geopolitical landscape and avoiding zero-sum postures.

Creating the Conditions for Conflict Transformation

Transforming entrenched conflicts in the Caucasus requires rejecting grand designs in favor of incrementalism. Stepwise, adaptive reforms that align with evolving political realities offer a more viable path forward than sweeping, externally imposed models. Local ownership must underpin all interventions, with domestic stakeholders leading the design and implementation of solutions. Regional coordination is essential—not only to reduce interstate tensions, but to create positive interdependencies that reinforce peace and stability across borders.

Strategic patience must remain a guiding principle. Short-term interventions that aim for quick success may generate dependency or provoke backlash. Instead, long-term resilience should be the central objective, even if gains are gradual. Finally, ongoing monitoring, impact assessment, and iterative adaptation are critical. Programs must be flexible enough to evolve with changing conditions and must avoid rigid, top-down frameworks that ignore local complexity.

In a political science paper, a matrix can be used as a structured way to organize and analyze complex relationships, comparisons, or interactions between political actors, institutions, policies, or ideologies. In the realm of political science, a matrix is more than a mere table—it is a conceptual scaffold, a cognitive map, a prism through which complexity is refracted into clarity. Officially, a matrix is defined as a rectangular array of elements arranged in rows and columns, used to systematically represent and analyze data or relationships. But in scholarly practice, it becomes a stage where ideologies collide, institutions converge, and actors perform the choreography of power. By employing the matrix as both lens and ledger, we transform abstraction into policy architecture. But in this study, the matrix becomes more than a grid—it becomes a map of intent, a mirror of complexity, and a mechanism of transformation.

This research adopts the EU Policy Matrix as a living framework—one that breathes with the rhythms of time and policy, one that charts the EU's engagement with the South Caucasus across short-term urgency, medium-term strategy, and long-term vision. It is not static; it evolves. It is not neutral; it speaks.

It speaks of governance, where pilot trainings become seeds, legal reforms become scaffolding, and merit-based institutions become the architecture of trust. It speaks of security,

where conflict mapping lays the groundwork, negotiations build the bridge, and regional frameworks anchor the 30 peace. It speaks of economy, where infrastructure is the artery, trade the lifeblood, and integration the heartbeat of prosperity. It speaks of society, where civic media sparks dialogue, participatory governance deepens voice, and inclusive societies become the soul of resilience.

Table 2 – Lets start out with some traversals overthere

EU Policy Matrix – Weakly Structured Caucasus States				
	Short-Term (0–2 yrs)	Medium-Term (2–5 yrs)	Long-Term (5+ yrs)	Risks / Challenges
Governance & Institutions	Diagnostic assessments; pilot training	Legal reforms; civil society support	Merit-based institutions	Accountability; reduced corruption
Security & Conflict Management	Conflict mapping; professiondation	Multilateral negotiations	Regional security frameworks	Geopolitical pressure
Economic Development & Connectivity	Infrastructure assessment; SME support	Diversified trade programs	Integrated economy	Political instability
Societal & Cultural Resilience	Civic education; media support	Participatory governance	Inclusive societies	Stronger cohesion

It speaks of economy, where infrastructure is the artery, trade the lifeblood, and integration the heartbeat of prosperity. It speaks of society, where civic media sparks dialogue, participatory governance deepens voice, and inclusive societies become the soul of resilience. And it warns. It warns of risks—of corruption that corrodes, of pressure that fractures, of political will that falters, of civil society that must not be silenced.

Each cell in the matrix is a moment of choice. Each row is a pathway of progress. Each column is a temporal lens—what we do now, what we build next, what we leave behind. By adapting this matrix, the study does not merely observe—it orchestrates. It does not merely analyze—it advocates. It does not merely describe a region—it dares to reimagine it.

Im Klartext: First, short-term actions focus on assessment, pilot programs, and conflict-sensitive engagement. Second, Medium-term actions build structural reforms, regional cooperation, and economic diversification. Third long-term outcomes aim for sustainable governance, security, 31 economic resilience, and societal cohesion. Fourth , continuous monitoring is essential to avoid overextension and ensure local ownership.

Institutional Anchoring of a Post-Imperial Caucasus

If the principles of decolonial acknowledgment, plural sovereignty, cross-border solidarity, conflict transformation, economic justice, cultural pluralism, environmental stewardship, democratization, non-alignment, and ethical borders are to move from abstraction to practice, they require institutional forms that can render them durable. In the absence of such anchoring, normative commitments remain aspirational and vulnerable to reversal. Multiple institutional options exist, each with its own set of strengths and weaknesses, and none can be adopted wholesale without adaptation to the specificities of the Caucasian context. Four models illustrate the spectrum of possible arrangements.

The first model is a confederal framework rooted in voluntary cooperation among the states of the region. Such an arrangement would allow Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, together with contested territories where feasible, to establish mechanisms for coordination in fields such as trade, environmental protection, infrastructure, and cultural exchange. The advantage of this design lies in its flexibility: sovereignty is preserved, while functional integration generates mutual benefit. Yet its limitations are clear. In a context marked by unresolved conflicts and deep mistrust, voluntary cooperation may prove fragile, and the absence of a central authority could hinder the enforcement of agreements. Without steadfast support and solid safeguards, the confederation risks slipping, sliding, and sinking into symbolism—mere ceremony without substance, form without force, ritual without reality.

A second model emphasizes the creation of a community of peace and reconciliation. Here the central institutional commitment would be to dialogue, truth-telling, and conflict transformation, potentially institutionalized through regional peace commissions, reconciliation forums, and transnational civil society platforms. Such a community directly addresses the most urgent obstacle to post-imperial transformation: the persistence of violent disputes. By embedding processes of recognition and healing, it offers the possibility of building trust from the ground up. However, this model faces the challenge of sequencing. Without prior stabilization, reconciliation initiatives may struggle to gain traction, and elites may resist truth-telling processes that could undermine their legitimacy.

A third model envisions the Caucasus as a network of interdependencies organized around economic, ecological, and cultural linkages. Institutionally, this could take the form of cross-border economic corridors, joint environmental councils, and regional cultural institutes. The strength of this approach lies in its capacity to produce tangible benefits that render cooperation attractive to otherwise hostile parties. Economic incentives and cultural exchanges can create constituencies for peace that go beyond official diplomacy. Its weakness is that it assumes that functional cooperation can precede or substitute for political settlement. In highly securitized environments, economic projects may be captured by elites or disrupted by renewed conflict.

Here is a comparative evaluation matrix followed by a concise analytical synthesis. It keeps an academic tone, avoids lists, and clarifies complementarities, trade-offs, and sequencing across the four formats: a sovereignty-preserving confederation, a community of peace and reconciliation, a network of interdependencies, and an EU-led SC+1 framework.

Each of these models reflects different pathways for institutionalizing a post-imperial Caucasus. A confederation emphasizes sovereignty-preserving cooperation; a community of reconciliation foregrounds healing and dialogue; a network of interdependencies builds cooperation through shared benefit; and the SC+1 format situates regional transformation within an externally guaranteed framework. None is without limitations, but together they suggest a spectrum of institutional possibilities that could be combined in hybrid fashion. The challenge for scholars and policymakers is to identify the mix that maximizes regional agency while minimizing dependence, and that balances the imperatives of peace, justice, and pluralism.

Comparing Regional Cooperation Models in the Black Sea

Table 3 Dimensions: Governance, Legitimacy, and Impact

Dimension	Confederation (Sovereignty Preserving)	Community of Peace & Reconciliation	Network of Interdependencies	EU-led SC+1 (External Facilitation Guaranteed)
Normative Alignment	Minimal; based on shared interests	Strong; rooted in shared values	Functional; issue-specific	High; aligned with EU norms
Conflict Sensitivity	Low; avoids contentious issues	High; prioritizes reconciliation	Medium; pragmatic cooperation	Medium; conditional on EU priorities
Sovereignty Protection	Strong; sovereignty is central	Moderate; some pooling of authority	Flexible; sovereignty respected	Mixed; external influence present
Ownership & Legitimacy	High national ownership	High societal legitimacy	Shared among stakeholders	Dependent on EU credibility
External Balance / Non- Alignment	Strong non- alignment stance	Balanced; inclusive of all actors	Adaptive; open to partnerships	EU-centric; limited non- alignment
Governance	Intergovernmental; consensus- based	Participatory; inclusive mechanisms	Decentralized; flexible formats	Hierarchical; EU-led coordination
Cultural Pluralism & Inclusion	Low; national narratives dominate	High; promotes diversity and dialogue	Medium; varies by issue	Medium; framed by EU standards
Principal Risks	Stagnation; lack of ambition	Political resistance; slow change	Fragmentation ; uneven commitment	Dependency; loss of local agency

Economic deliverables across the four cooperation models vary significantly in ambition, speed, and sustainability:

Limited; slow progress refers to models like the Confederation, where economic collaboration is cautious and fragmented. States prioritize sovereignty over integration, resulting in minimal joint ventures, delayed infrastructure development, and a lack of shared investment strategies. Progress is incremental and often hindered by political hesitation or bureaucratic inertia.

Moderate; long-term focus characterizes frameworks like the Community of Peace & Reconciliation, where economic initiatives are designed to support deeper societal healing and trustbuilding. Deliverables may not be immediate or flashy, but they aim for sustainable development—investing in education, inclusive employment, and social equity that gradually reshape the region's economic landscape.

High; driven by mutual interests defines models such as the Network of Interdependencies, where economic cooperation is pragmatic and results-oriented. States and stakeholders collaborate on energy, transport, and trade based on shared benefits. Deliverables are frequent and tangible—like joint infrastructure projects, digital innovation hubs, and cross-border commerce—because they serve clear mutual gains.

High; backed by EU funding applies to externally facilitated models like EU-led SC+1, where economic deliverables are accelerated through substantial financial and technical support from the European Union. These include large-scale infrastructure upgrades, regulatory harmonization, and capacity-building programs. However, the direction and priorities are often shaped by EU agendas, which may not always align perfectly with local needs.

Taken together, the matrix indicates that no single format fully satisfies the post-imperial criteria. The confederation option maximizes sovereignty and ethical borders but struggles with enforceability and deep conflict transformation. The reconciliation community excels normatively where it matters most—acknowledgment, dialogue, and healing—yet it is vulnerable to elite vetoes and requires protective sequencing to avoid retraumatization. The interdependency network delivers visible cooperation and creates pro-peace constituencies through trade, connectivity, cultural exchange, and ecological management, though it can be derailed by securitized crises or captured by entrenched interests. The EU-led SC+1 format supplies credibility, resources, and standards but introduces geopolitical sensitivities and risks displacing local authorship if over-reliant on conditionality.

A feasible pathway emerges from strategic layering and sequencing rather than exclusive adoption. The interdependency network can act as an early mover by generating low-politics cooperation with high social visibility, especially around climate adaptation, river-basin management, open research data, SME supply chains, cultural mobility, and energy efficiency. These functional ties should be normatively inoculated by light-touch reconciliation infrastructures—truth-telling micro-forums, protected memory initiatives, and survivor-centric protocols—so that cooperation does not proceed atop unresolved grievances. As confidence grows, a confederation-style coordination shell can formalize policy domains already cooperating *de facto*, thereby reducing enforcement gaps through joint funds, dispute boards with time-limited decisions, and transparent revenue-sharing formulas that anchor economic justice. Throughout, an EU-led SC+1 framework can provide calibrated scaffolding: technical

standards, monitoring, targeted financing, and a limited guarantee focused on process integrity rather than substantive outcomes, which helps preserve non-alignment while deterring coercive spoilers. The EU role should be explicitly bounded by sunset and review clauses and balanced by structured consultations with Russia, Turkey, and Iran on non-recognition of 34 forceful border changes and on de-confliction in specific corridors, thereby mitigating perceptions of bloc realignment.

Success depends on three cross-cutting design choices. First, enforceability must be decoupled from hard sovereignty transfers by using automaticity in narrow domains—pre-agreed arbitral timelines, escrowed funds, and corridor service-level agreements—so that compliance is procedural rather than political. Second, social legitimacy must be continuously produced through distributive visibility, with granular benefit-tracking dashboards, local procurement quotas, and educationlanguage compacts that foreground micro-communities typically overlooked by national frameworks. Third, insulation from geopolitical shocks requires redundancy: parallel routes, mirrored data repositories, rotating secretariats, and multi-vector financing that cannot be frozen by any single external actor.

In this hybrid design, the reconciliation community provides the region's ethical core; the interdependency network supplies immediate material and cultural gains; the confederation shell confers legal coherence without centralizing domination; and the EU-led SC+1 arrangement functions as a limited, reversible scaffold that is supportive rather than substitutive. The ordering is intentionally post-imperial in that power is dispersed, borders are managed ethically, and external support does not translate into tutelage.

7. Maritime Order in the Black Sea

US-EU Strategies

Maritime order is an authoritative framework that regulates conduct, safety, and organisation in maritime affairs, including shipping, navigation, trade and naval operations. The maritime order in the Black Sea is under strain, with disputes over territorial waters, blockades, and freedom of navigation. The maritime order of the Black sea rests on a fragile mix of international law (UNCLOS), regional treaties (Montreux), naval power balance and trade interests. Its standing is currently contested and unstable because of great power rivalries and ongoing conflicts, making it one of the most sensitive maritime regions in the world.

The current Turkish-Romanian-Bulgarian anti-mining operation in the Black Sea is poised to evolve from its initial stabilizing posture toward a more comprehensive operational remit under the UK-France led Reassurance force. In addition to traditional presence and surveillance duties, the upgraded mission would incorporate patrolling of critical maritime infrastructure, including ports, undersea cables, and energy transport routes, ensuring their resilience against both conventional and hybrid threats. The mission could also extend to coordinated maritime interdiction, search and rescue operations, and environmental monitoring, while remaining flexible to the inclusion of willing partners under a coalition framework. By formalizing these expanded responsibilities, the 35 reassurance force would create a credible, interoperable stabilizing presence capable of complementing NATO and EU maritime initiatives.

The operational environment in which such a force would function is shaped by multiple, overlapping maritime regimes. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes baseline rights and obligations concerning territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, continental shelves, and freedoms of navigation on the high seas. The Montreux Convention specifically regulates passage of warships through the Turkish Straits, imposing restrictions on type, tonnage, and duration of stay in the Black Sea. NATO operational frameworks define doctrines for joint exercises, rules of engagement, and intelligence sharing among allies. EU-led initiatives, exemplified by Blue2, provide a data-driven layer for maritime domain awareness, integrating vessel tracking, hydrographic information, and environmental monitoring. Additional bilateral and regional arrangements—anchored in agreements with littoral states such as Georgia and Ukraine—do not merely shape the map of cooperation; they sculpt the very contours of operational freedom and coordination. These pacts extend the hand of partnership even as they tighten the grip of obligation, creating a paradox where sovereignty is both safeguarded and surrendered, and where unity is born not from uniformity, but from the deliberate weaving of diverse strategic threads.

Taken together, these regimes create a complex legal and operational matrix that the upgraded reassurance mission must navigate, requiring careful harmonization of international law, alliance doctrines, and EU maritime strategy to ensure both legality and strategic coherence.

Tabel 4 - Comparative Matrix of Black Sea Maritime Regimes

Regime	Focus Domain	Governance	Role Distribution	Financing Mechanism
Montreux Convention (1936)	Security	Türkiye-led	Türkiye as gatekeeper; limits foreign naval access	State-based enforcement
IMO Conventions (SOLAS, MARPOL)	Safety & Environment	UN/IMO	All littoral states; flag-state responsibilities	National implementation; IMO technical support
Bucharest Convention (1992)	Environment	Regional (Black Sea states)	Joint pollution control and monitoring	National budgets; EU environmental funds
Black Sea Economic Cooperation	Trade & Connectivity	Multilateral (12 member states)	Economic integration; port and transport projects	Member contributions; EU and development banks

Black Sea Hydrographic Commission	Navigation	IHO-affiliated	Hydrographic data sharing; charting cooperation	National hydrographic offices
EU Black Sea Strategy	Multi-domain	EU-led	Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia integration; R&I funding	Horizon Europe; EU Cohesion & IPA funds
Türkiye-led Mine Countermeasure TG	Security	Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania	Naval coordination; mine clearance operations	National defense budgets; NATO support

Key Take-aways:

Türkiye plays a pivotal role in security governance through the Montreux Convention and its leadership in mine countermeasure operations. **The EU** is increasingly influential in environmental, trade, and research domains, especially through its Black Sea Strategy and Horizon Europe funding. Regional cooperation is evident in environmental regimes like the Bucharest Convention, but financing remains uneven, often reliant on EU grants or development bank loans. Multilateral frameworks like BSEC aim to harmonize economic and transport policies, though their effectiveness depends on political will and sustained investment.

The Turkish-led reassurance force can partner with an Anglo-French coalition of the willing on both the airside and the landside by constructing a deliberately layered, functionally integrated model of cooperation that preserves national command prerogatives while producing a single, shared operational effect. Airside integration would hinge on reciprocal access to maritime patrol aviation, unmanned aerial systems, and ISR tasking; agreed procedures for airspace deconfliction and integrated sensor tasking; and common protocols for data sharing so that maritime and air picture fusion delivers timely targeting-quality information to ships and shore nodes. Landside cooperation requires harmonised port and critical-infrastructure protection plans, interoperable rules for embarkation and disembarkation of forces, joint logistics hubs able to support surge sustainment, and coordinated civil-military arrangements for host-nation support and information exchange. In practice this means standing arrangements for combined air tasking orders, shared maritime patrol schedules, pre-agreed access to forward logistics bases, and legal instruments — memoranda of understanding or status arrangements — that clarify jurisdiction, criminal authority, and information classification when coalition assets operate from or through third-party territory.

These arrangements carry direct implications for alignment with the United States Sixth Fleet in the event of escalation. Operational alignment demands clear mechanisms for deconfliction and transfer of responsibilities so that the reassurance force, coalition air elements, and the

Sixth Fleet operate as mutually reinforcing layers rather than as parallel, potentially competing presences. In times of crisis the Sixth Fleet's capacity for power projection and maritime strike will be tactically decisive; therefore political and military planners must pre-define thresholds for escalation, handover points for area-dominance responsibilities, and common rules of engagement that reconcile differing legal authorities and political sensitivities. The existence of Montreux's special transit regime for the Straits means that any surge of naval forces into the Black Sea will be legally and procedurally constrained in ways that affect timing, force composition, and predictability; those constraints must be absorbed into coalition contingency planning so that Sixth Fleet operations outside the Black Sea are coherently linked to reassurance activities within it.

For the European Union's new maritime strategy these operational realities translate into several exigencies. The strategy must incorporate explicit legal awareness of the Montreux regime and the limitations it places on naval mobility, and it must set out modalities through which EU assets will routinely interoperate with Turkish command arrangements and with NATO and bilateral coalition frameworks. The EU's posture should move from platform-centric presence to system-centric integration, investing in cross-domain data fusion, standardized C2 interfaces, and legal instruments that permit rapid, politically authorised contributions from member states. It must also reconcile security and civil mandates: environmental monitoring, fisheries enforcement, and port resilience must be designed so as not to obstruct or duplicate defence tasks, and funding mechanisms should allow rapid re-tasking of civilian maritime assets in support of collective security. Finally, the strategy must spell out escalation management procedures, including political consultation rules, thresholds for NATO activation, and mechanisms to ensure transparency and predictability to neighbouring littoral states.

Blue2 can materially underpin these ambitions by providing the technical spine for a common operational picture and resilient data flows. At the tactical level Blue2-style capabilities should enable near-real-time AIS and radar fusion, integrated hydrographic and oceanographic data sets to inform safe navigation and infrastructure protection, consolidated environmental monitoring that alerts to pollution or incidents affecting maritime traffic, and a shared tasking module for ISR assets so that airborne and seaborne sensors are cued in a mutually complementary manner. Blue2 can also host interoperable access controls and role-based data governance so that Turkish, EU, coalition, and U.S. actors can exchange graded information without breaching national security or privacy constraints. Equally important are Blue2's potential contributions to cyber-resilience for maritime data networks and to a common catalogue of maritime critical infrastructure — ports, undersea cables, pipelines and energy terminals — against which patrolling and protective measures can be planned.

Despite these technological and organisational building blocks, a set of maritime regimes and legal ambiguities remain in need of sorting out before full coherence is attainable. The relationship between Montreux's straits regime and allied operational doctrines requires clearer, operationally usable guidance so coalition force flows are predictable and lawful. EEZ and continental-shelf delimitations in the Black Sea are incompletely settled in places and create frictions over rights to resource protection, military activities, and law enforcement. The legal reach and practical application of status-of-forces and access agreements between non-littoral coalition partners and host states often lack uniformity, complicating basing, logistics, and judicial matters. Undersea critical-infrastructure protection — particularly for cables and pipelines — sits in a grey zone between civilian maritime law, national security prerogatives,

and military protection tasks and needs clearer norms and incident-response protocols. Harmonisation is also required between search-and-rescue responsibilities, pollution response obligations, and military exclusion zones so that humanitarian and environmental duties are not sidelined in crisis. Finally, norms governing intelligence and classified data sharing among EU actors, Turkey, and extra-regional partners must be standardized to allow sensor fusion at operational tempo without unacceptable political risk.

These legal and normative gaps have distinct regional dimensions. Georgia and Ukraine, as non-EU littoral states, require assurances that coalition protection of infrastructure and patrols respect 37 sovereign rights while delivering tangible resilience and capacity building; their political sensitivities must shape any coalition basing, overflight, or interception practice. Romania and Bulgaria, as EU littoral members, perform a dual role as sovereign hosts and EU contributors and therefore need clarity about command arrangements and national caveats. Turkey's centrality, derived from both geography and the Montreux legal architecture, means Ankara will be an indispensable convenor; EU strategy must therefore be designed to enable Turkish operational leadership where appropriate while safeguarding EU political objectives and legal prerogatives. Russian naval posture remains an external strategic constraint that conditions coalition advantage and requires calibrated signalling and legal prudence.

Taken together, the operational, legal, and regional layers demand a maritime strategy that is at once technically integrated, legally literate, and politically calibrated so that reassurance activity, coalition air and land support, and transatlantic naval power can be harmonised into a single, credible stabilising architecture.

The United States factor operates as both a constraint and an enabler within this architecture. On the one hand, the Sixth Fleet embodies the most significant reservoir of naval power available to allied and partner forces, particularly in a crisis scenario. Its ability to project force, provide air and missile defence, deliver long-range strike, and guarantee sea lines of communication cannot be replicated by European or regional actors alone. This makes U.S. involvement indispensable for deterrence credibility and escalation dominance.

On the other hand, Montreux's restrictions on tonnage, duration, and categories of warships in the Black Sea limit Washington's capacity to operate directly in the theatre, creating a structural reliance on Turkey and on littoral allies such as Romania and Bulgaria for operational depth.

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Figure 4- US EU Strategies in the Black Sea

U.S. and EU Approaches to the Black Sea Region	
★ U.S.	EU
• Contain Russian aggression • Strengthen regional security architecture • Enhance NATO's Black Sea posture • Promote energy security and infrastructure resilience • Support democracy and rule of law • Boost economic and connectivity initiatives • Maintain freedom of navigation and maritime security	• Safeguard EU security and integrity • Strengthen international peace and security • Promote democracy and rule of law • Support human rights and fundamental freedoms • Encourage sustainable development • Promote good global governance • Ensure coherent EU action
Areas for Partnership	
• Deterring Russian threats • Strengthening NATO's Black Sea presence • Assisting security and democratic reforms • Developing energy and transport infrastructure	

For the Turkish-led reassurance force, the U.S. presence is therefore simultaneously a backstop and a complicating factor. Alignment with the Sixth Fleet necessitates advance agreements on escalation thresholds, rules of engagement, and information sharing, ensuring that U.S. surge capacity in adjacent seas reinforces rather than destabilises the reassurance mission. From a strategic perspective, Washington views the Black Sea not as a stand-alone theatre but as a hinge between the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, and the wider Euro-Atlantic security space. This regional framing implies that U.S. engagement is conditional and often subordinated to broader strategic imperatives, particularly vis-à-vis Russia and, increasingly, China.

For the EU's evolving maritime strategy, this introduces both exigencies and opportunities. Exigencies arise in the need to craft an approach that is complementary to, rather than duplicative of, U.S. deterrence postures, while also providing the EU with a distinct and credible maritime presence in its own neighbourhood. Opportunities lie in leveraging U.S. technological, ISR, and command-and-control assets to enrich EU initiatives such as Blue2, thereby achieving interoperability and avoiding strategic fragmentation. In practice, this means establishing channels for secure data integration, ensuring that U.S. naval ISR feeds can be fused with EU and regional platforms, and aligning EU strategic objectives with U.S. contingency planning without subsuming them entirely.

The Black Sea Maritime Hub could also facilitate the development of modern port infrastructure with deep water terminals, digital logistics systems, and green energy integration. It should strengthen regional connectivity through upgraded rail, road, and inland waterways linking hinterlands to the hub. It would address the need for harmonized customs, security and regulatory frameworks to streamline trade flows across Black Sea nations. It could promote sustainable practices, including carbon-neutral shipping corridors, waste management and biodiversity practices and foster international partnerships and investment. And workforce development to position the hub as a competitive gateway between Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

In short, the U.S. factor ensures deterrence credibility and escalation management, but its effective incorporation into the Turkish-led reassurance architecture and EU maritime strategy depends on carefully negotiated interoperability, respect for Montreux's constraints, and an explicit understanding that Black Sea stability must be treated as a shared transatlantic responsibility with differentiated but complementary roles.

Ukraine's naval posture and armament priorities have already adjusted to the asymmetric reality of the Black Sea and must continue to evolve if Kyiv is to preserve leverage and deny maritime freedom of action to a larger adversary. Rather than attempting to mirror conventional surface combatant inventories, Ukraine has focused on a distributed, technologically enabled naval strategy that combines coastal anti-ship missiles, unmanned surface and aerial systems, mobile coastal defences, and robust mine-warfare and counter-mine capabilities. This approach both exploits the geography of the littoral and mitigates the numerical and tonnage advantages enjoyed by Russia, and it has produced operational effects disproportionate to the resources expended — for example through the employment of Neptune coastal missiles and an expanding suite of armed maritime drones and ISR assets. Odessa JournalU.S. Naval Institute

As the Turkish-led naval reassurance architecture and allied coalitions expand their remit to include infrastructure patrols, persistent monitoring, and closer integration of air, sea and shore sensors, Ukraine should prioritise systems and posture that maximise interoperability with coalition sensing and strike enablers while preserving independent denial capabilities.

Table 5 -Naval Balance of Power in the Black Sea

Category	Russia	Ukraine	Turkey	Romania	Bulgaria	Turkey–Romania–Bulgaria (Collective)	NATO/EU Backing
Surface Combatants	Large fleet: frigates, corvettes, missile ships	Few vessels: fast attack craft, missile boats	Modernized frigates, corvettes	Small fleet: modern patrol ships	Small fleet: modern patrol ships	Moderate when pooled, still outnumbered by Russia	Standing NATO rotations, access to allied shipyards/logistics
Submarines	Modern Kilo-class subs, advanced AIP systems	None operational	4–6 submarines, modernization ongoing	None	None	Limited submarine deterrence	NATO subs constrained by Montreux Convention; ISR compensates
Coastal Defence	Bastion-P, Kalibr-capable systems, Neptune missiles, Western transfers	HISAR/O systems, coastal batteries	Coastal artillery, NATO systems incoming	Stronger when integrated	Stronger when integrated	Joint procurement, C2 integration, EU-funded upgrades	NATO integration enhances coastal defense interoperability
Mine Warfare	Large stock, historic reliance	Developing MCM with allies	Dedicated mine countermeasure fleet	Strong MCM tradition	Strong MCM tradition	Significant NATO-aligned MCM capability	NATO MCM groups active; BALTOPS and Poseidon exercises
Unmanned Systems	Naval drones, undersea drones	Bayraktar drones, sea drones	Advanced UAV fleet, naval drones	UAV integration, EU development	Light UAVs	Coordinated UAV/MCM with NATO	Western UAS funding supports regional development

Practically, this means further investment in long-range coastal strike and mobile launchers that can be networked into coalition ISR, prolific use of relatively inexpensive unmanned surface vessels for both strike and reconnaissance roles, expansion of electronic warfare and hardened, redundant C2 for dispersed coastal units, and a sustained programme of mine-

countermeasures and port hardening to keep maritime logistics viable. These choices would increase the cost of any maritime coercion or blockade to an adversary and would permit Ukraine to exploit windows created by coalition coverage and enlargement of mine-clearing efforts. Atlantic Council | Jazeera.

Strategic Posture / Doctrine

Russia maintains a dominant position in the Black Sea through its pursuit of sea control, long-range power projection, and robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Crimea serves as the central hub for these operations, enabling persistent surveillance, missile coverage, and naval presence that constrain allied freedom of movement and challenge regional stability.

Ukraine adopts a strategy of sea denial and asymmetric warfare in response to Russian dominance. This includes the deployment of land-based coastal missile systems, maritime drones, and unmanned strike platforms to degrade adversary mobility and impose operational costs without requiring traditional naval parity.

Turkey plays a pivotal role as both a regional power and NATO ally. Its posture is characterized by balanced deterrence, active NATO integration, and a gatekeeping function under the Montreux Convention. Turkey's control over access to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits provides it with strategic leverage, while its naval modernization supports both national and alliance-level objectives.

Romania serves as a key NATO anchor on the western Black Sea coast, with a focus on defensive deterrence and protection of critical infrastructure. Its posture prioritizes coastal defense, port security, and integration into NATO's regional presence and planning frameworks.

Bulgaria contributes through limited deterrence capabilities, with a focus on gradual naval modernization and participation in NATO operations. While its capabilities remain modest, Bulgaria's geographic location and NATO membership make it a valuable partner in multinational maritime efforts.

Georgia maintains a defensive maritime posture focused on coastal security, relying heavily on NATO and EU partnerships for support and training. Without major naval ambitions, Georgia emphasizes interoperability, situational awareness, and resilience over power projection.

Turkey–Romania–Bulgaria (Collective Posture) represent a sub-regional triad within NATO, forming a combined deterrence architecture. Their coordination enhances NATO's presence in the Black Sea, with a focus on infrastructure protection, mine countermeasures (MCM) operations, and interoperability under NATO frameworks.

NATO/EU Backing ensures strategic assurance through persistent presence, deterrence through interoperability, and enhanced situational awareness across domains. The coordination is further supported by the Blue2 framework, promoting integrated maritime domain awareness and operational synchronization among allies and partners.

The balance of naval power in the Black Sea will remain structurally asymmetrical so long as Montreux constrains sustained basing of non-littoral heavy units and Russia retains larger surface and sub-surface forces. Consequently, the most consequential determinants of near-term balance are not only ship counts but the effectiveness of anti-access/area-denial architectures, the density and quality of surveillance and targeting data (including coalition data-fusion initiatives), and the ability to protect or rapidly repair critical maritime infrastructure. In this context, the reassurance task groups being developed by Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria alter the operational picture by improving mine-clearance, persistent patrols near vulnerable infrastructure, and cooperative 41 maritime domain awareness — developments that partially offset raw Russian force projection albeit without eliminating it.

Arming and posture choices should therefore be guided by three interlocking imperatives. First, resilience and survivability: harden ports, decentralise logistical nodes, and field mobile coastal systems that complicate enemy targeting. Second, sensor-to-shooter integration: invest in architectures—secure datalinks, common operating pictures and permissive sharing arrangements— that allow Ukrainian strike assets to cooperate seamlessly with coalition ISR and C2 without compromising national control of weapons. Third, remediation and continuity: scale mine countermeasure forces and rapid repair capabilities for undersea cables, pipelines and port infrastructure so that economic lifelines remain exploitable under pressure. These imperatives imply an arms mix weighted toward coastal missiles, unmanned systems, sea denial munitions, specialised MCM vessels and robust C2/EW suites rather than a singular focus on larger surface combatants. CSISBusiness Insider

Finally, in scenarios of escalation the role of external actors — notably the U.S. Sixth Fleet and NATO partners — will shape Kyiv's room for manoeuvre. Because large non-Black Sea navies face legal and procedural limits entering the theatre, Ukraine's strategic calculus will continue to depend heavily on close cooperation with regional littoral partners and on coalitions that can deliver rapid ISR and strike support from adjacent seas and airspace. The net effect is that Ukraine can materially improve the local naval balance not by parity in conventional fleets but by deepening integration with allied sensing, strike and logistic enablers while multiplying low-cost, high-value sea-denial capabilities at home.

Road-Map for the Black Sea Maritime Hub

In strategic management, a road-map is a structured plan that outlines the steps, priorities and timelines an organization will follow to move from its current state to its desired future state. It serves as a visual or conceptual that connects strategy – the long-term vision and goals with execution in terms initiatives, projects and resources, ie. forms a bridge between between strategy formulation and implementation, ensuring alignment of people, organization and technology behind a common purpose in a clear and focused manner. Its components are vision & mission, strategic goals and objectives, current state assessment, initiatives and actions plans, timeline & phases, resources and capabilities, milestones and deliverables, KPIs, risks and contingencies and governance and accountability.

Goal

The goal of the Blue Maritime Hub in its military aspects is to build a resilient, interoperable Blue Sea Maritime Hub that enhances maritime situational awareness, protects critical maritime

infrastructure and lines of communication, and enables coordinated deterrence and resilience among partners and allies. This hub is a political-military construct with shared ISR, logistics enablers, C2 linkages, and politico-legal mechanisms.

Objectives

The roadmap seeks to achieve five strategic objectives:

First, it must enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) across the littoral regions and maritime approaches.

Second, it aims to harden and protect dual-use maritime infrastructure, including ports, undersea cables, and critical shipping lanes.

Third, it will provide logistics, sustainment, and surge capacity to support partners operating in the Black Sea region.

Fourth, it seeks to strengthen collective deterrence and enable rapid decision-making among key regional partners—primarily Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria—as well as other contributors within the naval-based Reassurance Force Coalition of the Willing.

Fifth, it is designed to build resilience against hybrid threats, particularly in the domains of cyber operations, disinformation, naval mines, and unmanned systems.

Lines of Effort — The Military Backbone of the Roadmap

Detection and Understanding: This line of effort focuses on integrating shared military intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. It leverages satellite feeds, coastal radar systems, UAV/MALE platforms, AIS data, and non-cooperative tracking methods to generate a shared operating picture. Standardized data-sharing protocols among partners are essential to achieving this goal.

Protection and Hardening of Resilience: Civil-military cooperation is central to safeguarding ports, undersea infrastructure, and merchant shipping. Emphasis is placed on non-kinetic hardening methods and sabotage denial measures—including the detection, delivery, and extraction of saboteurs—as well as the development of preparedness concepts, though not specific tactical procedures.

Enable and Sustain: This line supports logistical readiness through prepositioning of dual-use supplies, deployment of rapid repair teams for port and cable infrastructure, and establishment of coordinated frameworks for merchant vessel protection. Legal and administrative mechanisms for overflight rights and port access are also prioritized to ensure rapid reinforcement and sustainment.

Command and Control Integration: A hub-and-spoke C2 model will serve as the foundation for effective coordination. This includes streamlined information sharing, legal

clearance synchronization, and deconfliction mechanisms among allies and partners. Liaison hubs will standardize operational procedures, shorten decision-making cycles, and facilitate collective action.

Deter and Communicate: This effort encompasses a credible allied presence, strategic signaling, and synchronized operational messaging to increase the political and operational costs of adversarial coercion. It also includes the development of a counter-hybrid coordination center focused on cyber incident response and strategic communications.

Adaptation and Innovation: Rapid capability development is critical. Priorities include fielding of counter-UAS systems, enhancing resilient communications, enabling permissive logistics environments, and expanding training pipelines. Wargaming will be used to stress-test the hub concept and refine adaptive strategies under dynamic threat conditions.

Timeline and Milestones

Phase 0 – Concept and Coalition-Building

The initial phase focuses on securing a political mandate from EU and NATO partners to ensure legitimacy and alignment with broader strategic objectives. Concurrently, legal arrangements for data sharing and limited force support must be established to enable effective operational cooperation. A governance board will be formed to oversee the development of the hub, supported by a liaison network to facilitate coordination among participating nations.

Phase 1 – Baseline Capacity

During this phase, the coalition will operationalize a federated Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) picture using shared data feeds and standardized operational procedures. Pilot resilience projects will be launched at three designated littoral ports to test civil-military infrastructure protection concepts. Additionally, the first logistics prepositioning node will be identified and prepared.

Milestone:

The federated maritime common operating procedure becomes operational.

Phase 2 – Operationalisation

This phase will see the expansion of ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) coverage and the establishment of sustainment nodes to support ongoing operations. Civil-military exercises will become routine, reinforcing joint operational readiness and validating coordination protocols. Standing liaison elements will be embedded within key partner institutions to ensure continuous alignment and information flow.

Milestone:

Quarterly multinational exercises validate the hub's command and control (C2) structure and sustainment flows.

Phase 3 – Consolidation and Surge Readiness

In the final phase, the hub will be fully integrated with partner nations to allow seamless cooperation. Scalable surge protocols will be implemented to enable rapid response during crises. Hardened critical infrastructure programs will be mainstreamed across the region, embedding resilience into national and multinational planning and operations.

Milestone:

Hub achieves defined readiness KPIs for detection, repair, and coordination.

Note:

Exact timing and scope depend on political buy-in and resource allocation. Phases are illustrative.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Performance will be evaluated across six core metrics that reflect the initiative's strategic effectiveness, operational agility, and resilience posture.

The first indicator measures the percentage of the Black Sea surface area covered by the Naval Reassurance Force's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) feeds. This is assessed not by the number or location of sensors, but as a policy-based metric reflecting the operational scope of federated awareness.

The second metric evaluates the mean time required to detect and share anomalous maritime incidents among participating partners. This serves as a key communications and data dissemination indicator, reflecting both responsiveness and interoperability.

A third indicator tracks the number of ports with validated civil-military resilience plans in place. This reflects the depth of infrastructure preparedness, local coordination, and institutional maturity in integrating resilience into port operations.

The fourth KPI measures the time required to execute a logistics surge to a declared port. This encompasses both administrative readiness (including legal clearances and coordination) and transport execution timelines, providing a composite view of surge agility.

Fifth, the frequency and outcomes of coalition-led resilience exercises are monitored to assess operational readiness, procedural standardization, and cross-national interoperability.

Finally, the number of major disruptions to undersea and port infrastructure per year is tracked. This includes sabotage attempts, hybrid threats, and environmental stressors, offering a quantifiable measure of system-wide resilience and early-warning effectiveness.

Governance and Partnerships

The governance architecture is designed to ensure both strategic oversight and operational cohesion across stakeholders.

A Steering Board will provide senior-level guidance and political alignment. It will be composed of high-level representatives from the host littoral states, the European Union, NATO, and two to three contributing partner states. This body will set priorities, resolve escalated issues, and align the initiative with broader regional strategies.

Operational direction will be handled by a multinational Command-and-Control (C2) Operational Cell. This cell will include both civilian and military deputies and will manage daily coordination, implement directives from the Steering Board, and act as the nerve center of cross-functional activity.

Several functional Working Groups will operate under the Operational Cell to ensure specialized focus and progress across critical domains. These include:

- ISR/MDA – to advance intelligence integration and maritime awareness,
- Logistics & Ports – to coordinate infrastructure access and sustainment,
- Cyber & Critical Infrastructure – to ensure resilience across digital and physical domains,
- Legal & Finance – to manage regulatory, fiscal, and cross-border compliance, and
- Training & Exercises – to build readiness through structured and recurring engagements.

Private sector involvement will be institutionalized through a dedicated liaison structure. This will facilitate engagement with shipping companies, port authorities, telecom operators, and energy providers to enhance dual-use infrastructure resilience and ensure real-world applicability of preparedness measures.

Note:

The EU's Black Sea strategy envisions cooperative hubs and dual-use resilience projects.

Risk Matrix & Mitigation

One of the most significant strategic risks is political divergence among littoral states, which could stall progress or fracture consensus. This risk is mitigated through a flexible membership model that accommodates varying levels of participation, combined with structured confidence-building measures and the establishment of neutral, rules-based governance frameworks that prevent politicization of operational decisions.

A second risk involves the potential misinterpretation of increased military presence in the region, which could be perceived as escalatory by external actors. To mitigate this, the initiative emphasizes its civil resilience components—particularly in infrastructure protection and

humanitarian logistics—and ensures transparency through open communication channels and routine information exchanges with regional stakeholders.

The third major risk stems from hybrid threats, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and acts of physical sabotage targeting undersea cables, port facilities, or logistics nodes. Mitigation strategies include the development of joint rapid response mechanisms, allocation of resilience-focused grants to enhance security at key civilian infrastructure sites, and the implementation of coordinated public communication strategies to counter misinformation and maintain public trust.

Core Capability Areas

First, Maritime Domain Awareness / ISR Persistent surface, air, and space sensors (patrol aircraft, maritime patrol drones, satellites, coastal radar, and SIGINT) to detect threats and traffic.

Second, Naval Presence / Patrol Forces Frigates, corvettes, patrol vessels, and offshore patrol craft to assert sovereignty, escort shipping, and respond to incidents.

Third, Mine Countermeasures and EOC MCM vessels, UUVs/USVs, divers, and EOD teams to clear and manage sea mines and unexploded ordnance — a high priority in the Black Sea.

Fourth, Force Protection for Ports & Critical Infrastructure Layered physical security, base defense units, perimeter sensors, counter-drone systems, and policing to protect terminals, pipelines, and undersea infrastructure.

Fifth, Logistics & Sustainment Nodes Prepositioned stocks, joint logistics hubs, sealift, and combat/logistics support vessels to sustain military and dual-use commercial operations.

Sixth, Air Defense and Integrated C2 Short-to-medium range air-defense assets and integrated command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4ISR) linking naval, air, and land sensors/shooters.

Seventh, Cyber, Information Operations & Electronic Warfare Defensive cyber operations, electronic warfare to protect networks, GPS resilience, and counter-disinformation measures.

Eighth, specialized Littoral Capabilities Littoral strike/boarding teams, amphibious/maritime security units, and dive and salvage teams for close-to-shore operations and recoveries.

Ninth, Multinational Training, Liaison, and Legal Frameworks Joint exercises, liaison elements with partner navies, harmonized rules of engagement (ROE), customs, and legal arrangements for U.S./partner operations in the Black Sea.

Tenth, Medical, Humanitarian & Civil-Military Support Forward medical capabilities, casualty evacuation, and civil-military teams for commercial continuity and crisis response.

The road-map and its military components would significantly shape Black Sea security in relation to enhanced deterrence and stability due stronger naval and surveillance presence. It

would lead to safer maritime trade due to mine clearance, protection and patrols. More resilient infrastructure by hardening ports, pipelines and undersea assets. Stronger multinational cooperation through joint exercises, share command systems and harmonized legal frameworks to deepen trust among allies and partners. This provides the better basis for escalation management before they spiral into conflict and to liaise with the US sixth fleet and integrate the rearmed UA Navy in the event of serious escalatory moves by the Russian Black Sea fleet hunkering down on Crimea and in the occupied territories. Until the UA navy has been rebuilt, surge capacity would have to be primarily in cooperation with the UK-F led Naval Reassurance Force and in cooperation with the Sixth fleet integral with the UA Navy based on escalation scenarios.

Non-Military Maritime Regimes in the Black Sea and the Strategic Role of Türkiye's Anti-Mining Operations

The Black Sea is governed by a constellation of non-military maritime regimes that collectively aim to ensure safe navigation, environmental stewardship, and regional cooperation. These frameworks include international conventions such as the Montreux Convention (1936), which regulates naval access through the Turkish Straits and indirectly supports non-military stability by limiting the presence of foreign warships. Additionally, conventions under the International Maritime Organization (IMO)—notably SOLAS and MARPOL—establish safety and pollution control standards that apply to all littoral states. Regional mechanisms such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Bucharest Convention (1992) further reinforce collaborative efforts in maritime transport, environmental protection, and economic integration. The Black Sea Hydrographic Commission (BSHC) contributes to navigational safety through coordinated hydrographic surveys and charting.

In parallel with these regimes, Türkiye has assumed a proactive role in maritime security through the establishment of the Black Sea Mine Countermeasure Task Group (MCM TG), launched in 2024 in cooperation with Bulgaria and Romania. This initiative responds to the proliferation of naval mines resulting from the conflict in Ukraine, which pose significant risks to civilian shipping and port infrastructure. Although operationally military in nature, the task group's objectives align closely with non-military regimes by safeguarding commercial navigation and mitigating environmental hazards. The mine clearance operations support IMO goals by enhancing maritime safety and contribute to the objectives of the Bucharest Convention by preventing ecological damage from explosive remnants.

Türkiye's leadership in this domain reinforces its strategic position under the Montreux Convention and signals a commitment to regional stewardship. The integration of mine countermeasure operations with non-military maritime governance illustrates an emerging hybrid model of security cooperation—one that bridges traditional defense mechanisms with civilian maritime norms. As regional dynamics evolve, particularly in the context of Ukraine's recovery and potential reintegration into Black Sea frameworks, the expansion of such cooperative security initiatives may offer a pathway toward more resilient and inclusive maritime governance.

Table 6 -Maritime Domains of Strategic Relevance in the Black Sea

Domain	Black Sea Role	Enabling Conditions	Limiting Conditions
Security & Defense	Buffer zone between NATO and Russia; naval operations, mine clearance, surveillance	Montreux Convention; Türkiye's control of straits; NATO presence in littoral states	Restricted warship access; regional tensions; Russia's military footprint
Trade & Logistics	Gateway for Eurasian freight corridors (e.g., BTK Railway, Middle Corridor)	Port infrastructure (Constanța, Poti); regional cooperation; EU connectivity programs	Conflicts (e.g., Ukraine); limited intermodal integration; customs inefficiencies
Energy Transit	Transit route for pipelines (e.g., TANAP, TurkStream); offshore gas exploration	Türkiye's energy hub strategy; EU diversification goals; regional investment	Maritime boundary disputes; environmental risks; sanctions on Russia
Environmental Protection	Biodiversity hotspot; pollution control; climate resilience programs	Bucharest Convention; EU Green Deal; regional monitoring networks	Industrial runoff; weak enforcement; limited funding
Scientific Research & Innovation	Marine science, blue economy, climate modeling	EU Horizon programs; regional academic networks; hydrographic cooperation	Fragmented data sharing; political barriers to collaboration
Tourism & Culture	Coastal tourism, cruise routes, cultural heritage	Coastal tourism, cruise routes, cultural heritage	Security concerns; infrastructure gaps; seasonal limitations

The security domain is tightly regulated by the Montreux Convention, giving Türkiye a central role in managing naval access and mine countermeasure operations. In trade and logistics, the Black Sea is vital for connecting Central Asia to Europe, but its full potential depends on peace, infrastructure upgrades, and customs harmonization. The energy domain benefits from Türkiye's ambition to become a regional energy hub, though geopolitical risks and environmental concerns remain. The Environmental and scientific domains are supported by

EU-led initiatives and regional conventions, but require stronger enforcement and cross-border collaboration. The Tourism and cultural exchange offer soft power opportunities, especially for coastal states, but are vulnerable to instability and underinvestment.

UA Navy

The future of the Ukrainian navy lies not in chasing parity with Russia's tonnage, but in mastering the art of denial and disruption. By fielding mobile coastal missile batteries and swarms of unmanned surface and aerial systems, Ukraine transforms geography into an ally and turns vulnerability into deterrence. Each Neptune missile or sea drone carries a symbolic weight far greater than its cost, signaling that Russian dominance in the Black Sea is neither inevitable nor unchallengeable. The coalition reassurance mission led by Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria provides the connective tissue of patrols, mine-countermeasures, and infrastructure protection upon which 46 Ukraine can anchor its strategy. Interoperability with allies is no longer a technical aspiration but a strategic necessity: every sensor must speak to every shooter, every patrol must feed a common picture. Ports, pipelines, and cables are not just economic lifelines but strategic targets; their defense demands both hardened infrastructure and agile naval forces. The Sixth Fleet looms in the background, a reminder that escalation would bring American power to bear, but Montreux's straits restrictions ensure that Ukraine and its littoral partners remain the first line of defense. Thus the balance of naval power will be judged not by hull counts but by the speed and ingenuity with which Ukraine and its partners weave denial capabilities into a resilient, layered defense. A navy built on drones, coastal missiles, electronic warfare, and mine warfare may appear modest in form, yet it is formidable in function, able to deny freedom of action to a stronger adversary. In this spirit, Ukraine's maritime future embodies a wider truth of the Black Sea: power rests less in the weight of fleets than in the clarity of strategy and the unity of willing partners.

The Ukrainian Navy, once a modest coastal force, now stands as a symbol of defiance and ingenuity in the face of overwhelming maritime aggression. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent degradation of its fleet, Ukraine has been forced to reimagine its naval doctrine—not through conventional parity, but through asymmetric innovation. In this crucible of necessity, the Navy has evolved into a lean, adaptive force, yet its needs remain urgent and multifaceted.

Foremost among these is the imperative for coastal defense. The Black Sea, once a conduit of commerce, has become a theater of blockade and bombardment. To reclaim strategic depth and deter further incursions, Ukraine must be equipped with advanced shore-based missile systems capable of striking with precision and range. These systems are not merely tools of deterrence; they are instruments of sovereignty.

Equally vital is the expansion of Ukraine's maritime drone fleet. The Magura V5 and its successors have already demonstrated the disruptive potential of unmanned surface vessels. Yet to sustain this momentum, Ukraine requires stealthier platforms, enhanced autonomy, and integration with real-time intelligence. In this domain, technology is not a luxury—it is the lifeblood of asymmetric warfare.

Surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities form the eyes and ears of any modern navy. Ukraine must possess persistent maritime domain awareness, enabled by radar arrays,

satellite-linked sensors, and airborne ISR platforms. Without vision, even the most valiant fleet sails blind.

The need for small combat vessels and patrol boats cannot be overstated. In the shallow, contested waters of the Black Sea and Sea of Azov, agility triumphs over tonnage. These vessels, nimble and lethal, serve as guardians of the coast and sentinels of sovereignty.

Mine countermeasure systems represent another critical frontier. Russia's indiscriminate use of naval mines has transformed the sea into a field of hidden peril. Ukraine must be armed with advanced detection and clearance technologies, including autonomous underwater vehicles, to restore freedom of navigation and protect civilian maritime traffic.

Yet no arsenal, however formidable, can be sustained without a coalition of resolve. The financial burden of Ukraine's naval resurgence must be borne collectively. The European Union and its willing partners must rise to this challenge—not as benefactors, but as co-defenders of a rules-based order. Contributions should be calibrated to economic capacity, defense readiness, and strategic proximity. Germany, France, and Italy, as economic pillars, must lead in fiscal support. Poland, Sweden, and the Netherlands, with their robust defense industries, should provide in-kind assets and training. Romania and Bulgaria, as Black Sea neighbors, must anchor regional coordination and logistics.

The European Peace Facility and the Ukraine Facility must serve as central conduits for procurement and reimbursement. Joint EU bonds or a dedicated Maritime Security Fund could further democratize the burden. Private sector partnerships and NATO coordination would amplify impact and reduce duplication.

In this endeavor, the stakes transcend Ukraine. They touch the very essence of European security, maritime freedom, and democratic resilience. To equip Ukraine's Navy is not merely to arm a fleet—it is to fortify a frontier, to defend a principle, and to honor a promise.

Escalation Scenario

In the event of a regional emergency, the U.S. Sixth Fleet and the UK–French Reassurance Force, configured in a naval format and forward-berthed in the Mediterranean, would be placed on high readiness to respond. These forces would act as rapid reaction and stabilizing elements capable of reinforcing littoral partners, securing critical infrastructure, and projecting maritime presence in coordination with NATO command structures. Escalation scenarios include a large-scale hybrid attack targeting undersea infrastructure or ports; a direct maritime incursion or blockade attempt by adversary naval forces; the deployment of long-range A2/AD systems threatening sea lines of communication; destabilization in non-NATO Black Sea states requiring containment or humanitarian response; and coordinated cyber and information campaigns intended to disrupt maritime logistics or command-and-control networks. Across all contingencies the priority would be de-escalation through credible allied presence, coordinated signaling, and rapid, interoperable response under established alliance protocols. In those scenarios the fleets would have to be separate from but interoperable with the UA Navy.

Table 7 - Escalation scenarios

Escalation Level	Triggers / Indicators	Likely Actors	Immediate Military Response (hours → days)	Political / Legal Response	Decision Authority & Timing	Escalation Control & De-escalation Measures
Routine	Normal maritime activity; isolated safety incidents (groundings, accidents); routine AIS gaps	Civilian shipping, local forces	Maintain routine patrols; MDA monitoring by federated feeds (Sixth Fleet, UK–French Reassurance Force on standby)	Diplomatic monitoring; routine notifications to partners	National maritime authorities / Operational Cell — immediate (hours)	Transparency: publish incident reports, liaise with port authorities, normalise presence
Elevated Tension	Repeated AIS spoofing; suspicious unmanned surface/aircraft near critical nodes; probing naval patrols	State-backed probes, proxies, criminal saboteurs	Increase ISR, deploy escorts for high-value shipping, reroute commercial traffic where needed	Issue diplomatic demarches; activate Steering Board alerts; legal review of transit/overflight	Operational Cell + Steering Board — 12–48 hours	Communication: public messaging of intent, establish direct military hotlines, confidence-building exchanges
Provocation	Sabotage attempts on port/cable; targeted cyber incidents degrading port ops; mine sightings in approaches	Hybrid strike teams, clandestine naval operations	Harden ports, deploy MCM assets, escort convoys, preposition repair teams, Sixth Fleet/UK–French assets to high readiness and forward positions	Formal protests; invoke allied coordination (NATO liaison); temporary port access/legal clearance expedited	National leaders + NATO C2 — 24–72 hours	Show of restraint: calibrated maritime escorts, invitations for third-party observers, activation of joint incident response protocols
Limited Hostilities	Kinetic attacks against merchant ships; localized blockade; targeting of military vessels; credible missile strikes	Regular naval units or proxy naval task groups	Escalate to interdiction and defensive strikes (proportional), mine-clearance, no-sail zones; surge logistics to affected ports; implement rules of engagement to protect shipping	Emergency consultations among allies; possible invocation of Article 4/5 consultations depending on severity; targeted sanctions	National governments + NATO authorities — 24–96 hours	Crisis channels open; joint investigations; calibrated proportional responses; declared objectives to limit scope
Major Hostilities	Sustained offensive operations (blockade, amphibious	Major state naval task force, integrated	Full coalition maritime interdiction, sea control operations,	High-level alliance crisis management; emergency legal authorizations;	Heads of state / NATO Council — immediate	Aggressive de-escalation offers only after demonstrable cessation;

	landings), attacks on critical national infrastructure across ports and cables	A2/AD employment	strikes against A2/AD nodes, expeditionary support to littoral partners (Sixth Fleet and UK–French force lead naval tasking)	wide sanctions; mobilization of reserves	strategic decisions (hours)	humanitarian corridors; clear political conditions for de-escalation
Full-Scale Conflict	Widespread maritime warfighting, crippling cyber campaigns, strategic targeting of civilian lifelines	State at war with coalition or multiple coordinated actors	Maximum coalition combat operations to restore sea lines, defend NATO territory and partners, full logistics surge, potential air/land integration	Declaration of wartime measures; alliance collective defense invoked; wartime legal regimes active	Heads of state / NATO Council — immediate and sustained	Conflict termination through negotiated settlement, sustained pressure and guarantees, international mediation and post-conflict security guarantees

Notes and Implementation Guidance

The primary U.S. maritime response and ISR backbone is provided by the U.S. Sixth Fleet, while the UK–French Reassurance Force, configured in a naval format and forward-berthed in the Mediterranean, serves as a forward-deployed European surge and stabilization element. National navies and partner sustainment nodes support logistics and resilience responses, enabling rapid reinforcement and restoration of critical maritime functionality.

Timing terms are used as planning guidelines: “Immediate” refers to actions within hours, “short” covers 12–72 hours, and “sustained” refers to operations over days to weeks. These timeframes are indicative and should be refined and operationalized in specific operational plans and procedures.

All military and civilian response activities must be underpinned by legal authorities, including national laws, NATO mandates, status-of-forces agreements, and relevant constraints such as those imposed by the Montreux Convention. Before any kinetic escalation beyond clearly defined self-defense, the appropriate legal and administrative approvals must be documented.

Communication is a critical element in crisis management. A continuous public information strategy, combined with dedicated crisis hotlines—both military-to-military and political—should accompany each escalation level to prevent misinterpretation and unintended escalation. Transparency of intent and ongoing fact-based updates reduce the risk of misunderstandings.

The escalation control toolkit should include structured confidence-building exchanges, invitations to observers, independent investigations, calibrated proportional responses, and humanitarian communications. These mechanisms should be used proactively to create space for political solutions and to keep military actions proportionate and reversible.

The U.S. Sixth Fleet, UK–French Reassurance Force, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Ukrainian Navy primarily operate together during heightened tensions and crises. At routine levels, cooperation focuses on data sharing and maritime domain awareness rather than joint operations. During elevated tension, these forces increase coordinated patrols, ISR sharing, and protective escorts. Provocations trigger joint responses such as mine countermeasures, convoy escorts, and rapid infrastructure repair. In limited hostilities, they conduct combined interdiction, defensive strikes, and protect merchant shipping under unified command. Major hostilities see full coalition task forces integrating sea control, A2/AD suppression, and expeditionary support. The rearmed Ukrainian Navy acts alongside coalition forces to secure littoral waters and critical infrastructure. Full-scale conflict demands maximum interoperability across naval, air, and land domains with sustained logistics. Continuous joint exercises and communication help prevent escalation and maintain readiness. Overall, interoperability increases progressively with crisis severity, ensuring coordinated, rapid, and effective maritime defense.

Thus, it is recommended that operational plans incorporate clear, measurable trigger thresholds for movement between escalation levels—for example, a specified number of disabled or damaged vessels, confirmed sabotage incidents, or percentage loss of MDA coverage. Clear, quantifiable thresholds reduce decision uncertainty and promote consistent, predictable responses across coalition actors. This would also ensure Russia never forgets who is in charge and what the rules are in the Black Sea.

RENOVI

In the Black Sea, the EU and the United States share a set of core preferences about naval order that reflect their common vision of the region as an open, rules-based maritime space. At the forefront is a commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight, grounded in UNCLOS and long-standing U.S. and EU practice, which seeks to prevent the sea from becoming a closed Russian sphere of influence. Both also prioritise the security of critical maritime infrastructure — pipelines, ports, undersea cables — and regard its protection as integral to energy security and resilience of trade routes. They likewise converge on the principle of transparency in naval deployments and exercises, preferring predictable force postures, advance notification, and cooperative maritime domain awareness systems, such as those underpinned by Blue2, that can provide a shared operational picture and prevent incidents at sea. Finally, the EU and the U.S. emphasise coalition-based reassurance operations, in which interoperability and layered presence serve to reinforce deterrence without undermining Montreux's provisions.

At the same time, there exists a narrower but real band of common ground with Russia. All parties share an interest in upholding the Montreux Convention, which provides predictability and legal clarity on naval access through the Turkish Straits and limits the risk of uncontrolled escalation. There is also implicit convergence on the need for reliable regimes governing search and rescue, pollution control, and fisheries management, where practical cooperation has

historically been possible despite political antagonism. Russia, the EU, and the U.S. alike benefit from stable and safe maritime transport corridors, particularly for commercial shipping, and have a mutual stake in avoiding accidents that could trigger wider conflict. Blue2 can reinforce this limited overlap by offering a technical layer of environmental monitoring, incident reporting, and vessel tracking that is not inherently adversarial and could, in theory, sustain selective information exchanges even in a highly contested security climate.

Thus the open-region preferences of the EU and U.S. — freedom of navigation, infrastructure protection, transparency, and coalition deterrence — overlap with Russia only in specific functional domains: Montreux compliance, safety of navigation, and environmental and resource management. The challenge for maritime strategy is to preserve this sliver of commonality while reinforcing those broader principles of openness that Russia seeks to erode.

The Black Sea plays a strategic role across several maritime domains, each shaped by distinct geopolitical, economic, and environmental conditions. Here's a breakdown of the key domains and the enabling or limiting conditions for each:

Summary: Strategic Domains of the Black Sea

The Black Sea is increasingly emerging as a critical maritime domain with profound implications for regional and global order. Its strategic significance spans security, trade, energy, environmental governance, and scientific cooperation, positioning it as a contested and complex maritime space. The maritime order in the Black Sea is shaped by a diverse array of legal regimes, institutional frameworks, and governance practices that vary in scope and effectiveness. Türkiye, the European Union, and various regional organizations—including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Black Sea Commission—play pivotal roles in structuring this order, balancing national interests with multilateral cooperation.

From a security perspective, the region has gained prominence due to heightened naval activity, the need for mine clearance, and the development of maritime surveillance capabilities, especially in light of recent geopolitical tensions. Trade and connectivity have also reinforced the Black Sea's maritime relevance, as illustrated by the growing significance of transcontinental freight corridors such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) Railway and the Middle Corridor, which link Europe to Central Asia and China via maritime and overland routes. In the energy domain, offshore gas exploration and the transit of energy resources through undersea pipelines underscore the basin's role as both a source and conduit of energy. At the same time, the region faces mounting environmental challenges, including marine pollution and biodiversity loss, prompting the need for coordinated governance strategies aimed at ecological protection and climate resilience. Finally, science and innovation are becoming increasingly integrated into the maritime order through regional marine research initiatives and the promotion of a sustainable blue economy, reinforcing the role of the Black Sea as a platform for cooperative knowledge production and innovation.

In sum, the evolving maritime order of the Black Sea reflects the intersection of strategic interests, regulatory diversity, and the growing urgency for cooperative frameworks that can accommodate both competition and collaboration in this geopolitically sensitive region.

9. Towards a Southern Caucasus FTA

The European Union maintains differentiated trade frameworks with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Georgia benefits from a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), Armenia engages through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in the context of its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) membership, and Azerbaijan operates under the more limited Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). These asymmetries constrain the prospects for a trilateral South Caucasus free trade area. This paper evaluates current EU–South Caucasus trade relations, explores the principal obstacles to regional economic integration, and proposes a pragmatic roadmap for gradually establishing a South Caucasus Free Trade Area (SCFTA).

The South Caucasus occupies a geopolitical and economic interstice between Europe and Asia. Regional trade integration has long been identified as a potential driver of growth, stability, and connectivity (Delcour 2021). Yet divergent external commitments and entrenched political cleavages complicate efforts to build a common regional market. By assessing existing EU relationships with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and by articulating a sequenced strategy for cooperation, this paper assesses the feasibility and the likely pathway toward a South Caucasus Free Trade Area.

Azerbaijan now exports a third of its energy exports to the European market, replacing to some extent Russian exports but the Azeri market share of the EU's total energy imports trails behind Norway (33,6%) , Russia (18,8%) , the US (16,7%), KSA (7%) , covering about 5% of our Union's energy supply needs. The relationship is transactional and is subject to structural constraints of an internal and regional nature. It lacks political coherence² . To make it so, relations must , first, be anchored in a clear strategic framework by upgrading the legal basis by finalizing the longnegotiated Comprehensive Agreement, replacing the PCA from 1999. Second, Baku need to be situated clearly in the ENP while allowing for differentiated tailored engagement similar to how the EU treats Georgia, Armenia or Ukraine. The energy dialogue could be better linked to broader stability and governance dialogues, so energy doesn't exist in a political vacuum. There must be a balance between values and interests, human rights and democracy, security and sovereignty. Third, develop multi-pillar cooperation encompassing connectivity a la the Middle Corridor, green transition and people-to-people ties. Fourth, the EU must improve conflict resolution role both through mediation between Baku and Yerevan and a more consistent stand with clear red lines, but also clear incentives would make relations steadier. Fifth, there must be more internal EU coherence so long as Germany, France and Hungary pursue divergent national policies with Baku, which undermines the EU's collective leverage. A stronger common position on Azerbaijan is crucial. The EEAS must also ensure convergence and consistency between the EEAS, the EU Commission (energy/climate) the Parliament's positions. In short, to make EU-Azerbaijan relations politically coherent, the EU would need to integrate energy-security cooperation with a stable framework of political, human rights and regional stability commitments, while maintaining EU unity.

The EU–Georgia relationship is characterized by extensive regulatory convergence following the 2014 Association Agreement and its embedded DCFTA (European Commission 2014). Armenia's engagement with the EU is shaped by its EAEU membership, which imposes a common external tariff. The 2017 CEPA therefore advances regulatory cooperation but does

not permit tariff liberalization (European Commission 2017). Azerbaijan maintains a more cautious posture.

Relations with the EU are still governed by the 1996 PCA, with negotiations for a new agreement continuing but without achieving a comprehensive free trade framework (EU Delegation to Azerbaijan 2020).

Institutional incompatibilities constitute the most significant obstacle to a trilateral South Caucasus free trade area. Armenia's membership in the EAEU entails collective tariff-setting, constraining its ability to negotiate independently (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017). Georgia's DCFTA commitments embed EU-aligned regulatory frameworks, limiting flexibility. Azerbaijan, heavily dependent on hydrocarbons, has been reluctant to pursue comprehensive liberalization (World Bank 2019). Political mistrust and unresolved conflicts further hinder regional cooperation (Cornell 2020).

In the short term, approximately one to three years, the focus should be on confidence-building and pragmatic sectoral cooperation. Cross-border infrastructure projects in transport and energy could yield immediate economic gains and foster interdependence. Sectoral agreements in digital trade, transit, and energy interconnection may lower transaction costs and prepare the ground for deeper collaboration. The European Union can support these efforts by harmonizing customs procedures and modernizing border management (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015).

Over the medium term, spanning three to seven years, institutional alignments should be pursued. Bilateral accords may be developed as stepping stones, while dialogue between the EU and the EAEU could identify flexible arrangements permitting Armenia's participation. A South Caucasus Economic Cooperation Council would institutionalize dialogue, while a regional customs transit agreement could reduce barriers to trade flows (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2018).

In the long term, approximately seven to fifteen years, these incremental arrangements could be consolidated into a broader regional framework. Harmonization of standards, recognition of certifications, and EU-supported convergence could culminate in a trilateral SCFTA. To reconcile divergent commitments, innovative legal architectures, such as EU–EAEU bridging mechanisms, may be required. Ultimately, the success of such an arrangement will depend on whether it delivers equitable economic gains and builds political trust among all three states.

A South Caucasus Free Trade Area remains an ambitious but distant prospect. Armenia's EAEU membership and Georgia's DCFTA commitments create structural frictions, while Azerbaijan's cautious liberalization strategy limits momentum. Yet a phased roadmap emphasizing infrastructure, sectoral cooperation, and institutional dialogue could gradually lay the foundation for integration. The European Union's role as a sponsor and facilitator will be decisive. Over the long term, an SCFTA could enhance regional resilience and stability, aligning the South Caucasus more closely with European and global economic networks.

10. How to bring in 3+3 ?

The 3+3-format brings together Russia, Turkey, and Iran and the three South Caucasian nations. The rationale is to exclude Western influence and ensure that regional matters are addressed by regional states themselves. With the Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabagh over shifting the balance of power perceptible to all observers and policy-makers, the 3+3 dialogue was pitched as a way to reduce tensions, open transport routes and rebuild trust. The idea is that joint discussions on security and economic cooperation might help prevent renewed conflict. For Russia, it strengthens its influence in the Southern Caucasus at a time of Western sanctions and reduced trust. For Turkey, it expands its regional footprint and solidifies its alliance with Baku. For Iran, it helps counter isolation and prevents being sidelined in regional affairs. The Caucasus is a strategic corridor linking Europe and Asia. The dialogue aims to promote infrastructure projects, trade, energy transit and transport corridors such as the perfectly legitimate North-South Transport multi-modal road, rail and sea corridor³. There is the proposed Zangzeur corridor between Azerbaijan and Turkey running along the southern belt of Armenia in the Syunik province that now appears to be eclipsed by the US snatching it out of the hands of Kremlin-linked interests rebranding it as the Trump corridor.

Both Russia and Turkey want to avoid uncontrolled escalation in Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions. Iran is concerned about border changes and foreign military presence, especially Israeli influence in Azerbaijan. Georgia is very circumspect and has suspended participation in the pourparlers, as it has unresolved issues with Russia, but it still benefits from regional trade and transit. Armenia is wary of domination by Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Mutual distrust between participants often stalls progress.

The rationale of the 3+3 Dialogue is to create a regional mechanism for security, economic cooperation, and conflict management in the South Caucasus, led by neighboring powers and to limit Western involvement. Thus, the 3+3 format—bringing together Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Russia, and Iran—emerges in a region still marked by the legacies of empire and the tensions of post-imperial adjustment. While designed as a regional dialogue framework, it is constrained by asymmetry, mistrust, and divergent strategic horizons.

Structural Constraints. The asymmetry of power within the group is acute. Azerbaijan and Turkey act in concert, aligning around ethnic and geopolitical ties, while Armenia enters negotiations weakened by its losses in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Russia and Iran, meanwhile, embody post-imperial dynamics: Moscow seeks to retain a sphere of influence in its “near abroad,” while Tehran insists on safeguarding its northern frontier against Turkish expansion and Western penetration. Both powers frame their engagement less as facilitation and more as guardianship, which diminishes the credibility of the format as an even-handed platform.

Historical Burdens. The post-imperial condition is further complicated by long-standing grievances. Armenia’s fraught history with both Turkey and Azerbaijan is mirrored by Georgia’s unresolved antagonism with Russia. These layered animosities translate into a deficit of trust, meaning that even when agreements are reached, enforcement mechanisms remain precarious.

Exclusionary Tendencies. By privileging Russia and Iran as central interlocutors, the 3+3 reinforces a post-imperial framing of the Caucasus as a buffer zone rather than an autonomous region. The reluctance of Georgia to participate underscores this tension, while the absence of broader external guarantors—such as the EU or OSCE—limits the capacity to anchor agreements in a wider normative order.

Procedural Fragility. Negotiations are encumbered by the breadth of issues at stake, from borders to corridors, from energy to minority rights. Without institutionalized mechanisms, the process risks becoming declarative, reflecting the symbolic politics of empire rather than the pragmatic needs of post-imperial reconciliation.

Pathways Forward. Overcoming these constraints requires insulating the format from its post-imperial legacies. External engagement—whether through EU monitoring missions, OSCE practices, or neutral international guarantors—could help balance the Russia–Iran axis. Confidence-building should proceed incrementally, with technical and economic cooperation separated from high-conflict political files, thereby generating trust through tangible benefits. Robust enforcement mechanisms and the inclusion of civil society actors could gradually transform the 3+3 from an arena of imperial shadow-play into a vehicle for regional stabilization.

Here’s a fully academic-style comparative table outlining Iran, Russia, and Turkey’s interests and how the EU can act as a balancing contributor in regional power dynamics

Table 8 – Keeping 3+3 constructively engaged

Actor	Key Interests	Leverage Points	Potential EU Role
Iran	- Maintain a stable southern Caucasus and northern Persian Gulf periphery - Ensure transit routes accommodate Iranian economic integration - Assert regional leadership and mediation capacity - Expand trade and circumvent sanctions	- Influence over regional corridors - Diplomatic engagement with local actors - Soft power via economic and cultural ties	- Facilitate multilateral dialogue - Support infrastructure that integrates Iran without isolating other actors - Provide neutral monitoring to build confidence
Russia	- Preserve post-Soviet sphere of influence - Maintain buffer zones and de facto control in contested areas - Dominate energy and transit routes - Signal geopolitical indispensability	- Military presence and peacekeeping forces - Control over key transport and energy infrastructure - Diplomatic leverage in multilateral forums	- Serve as impartial guarantor in conflict-sensitive initiatives - Fund and support alternative infrastructure to reduce unilateral dependencies - Encourage adherence to norms through structured incentives

Actor	Key Interests	Leverage Points	Potential EU Role
Turkey	- Expand political and economic influence in South Caucasus - Control energy transit and connectivity corridors - Maintain security along eastern borders - Balance relations with Russia, Iran, and NATO/EU	- Leadership in energy and transport corridors - Diplomatic leverage with Azerbaijan and Georgia - Strategic positioning between East and West	- Provide funding and technical assistance for corridor projects - Support conflict-sensitive governance and institutional capacity - Act as mediator to harmonize Turkish interests with regional stability objectives

Overcoming these constraints requires insulating the format from the enduring influence of postimperial dynamics. Constructive external engagement—through EU monitoring missions, OSCE best practices, or neutral international guarantors—can help counterbalance the dominant Russia– Iran axis and provide impartial oversight. Confidence-building should proceed incrementally, prioritizing technical and economic cooperation while deliberately decoupling these initiatives from highly contentious political disputes. By generating tangible, mutually beneficial outcomes, such measures can foster trust and demonstrate the utility of collaboration. The integration of robust enforcement mechanisms, alongside active participation by civil society actors, further strengthens accountability and transparency. Over time, these calibrated interventions can transform the 3+3 format from a stage for geopolitical rivalry into a credible platform for regional stabilization, dialogue, and cooperative problem-solving.

The EU’s role as a neutral and constructive actor can help balance competing regional interests by combining infrastructure investment, conflict-sensitive governance support, and multilateral monitoring. By aligning incentives and offering context-sensitive pathways for cooperation, the EU can reduce zero-sum dynamics, encourage incremental confidence-building, and facilitate a stable transition of regional influence among Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

Following the US-EU engagement of Baku and Yerevan, Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan gathered resolved to confer the North-South Corridor with momentum. The North-South Corridor (NSC) is a strategic transport and trade route designed to connect Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and India, linking northern Europe and Russia with the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The corridor’s idea is to provide a shorter, faster, and cost-efficient alternative to traditional maritime routes, reducing transit times by up to 30–40% and promoting regional economic integration. It leverages multi-modal transport—rail, road, and maritime—to facilitate seamless movement of goods, while enhancing connectivity between key ports, industrial hubs, and landlocked regions.² Amid the current sanctions regimes, the corridor functions as a strategic outlet for Russia—providing an access route to the Persian Gulf and representing Moscow’s broader geopolitical pivot to the Global South. Furthermore, it aligns significantly with key elements of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), creating opportunities for coordination and mutual

²² <https://rujec.org/article/86617/>

reinforcement between Russian and Chinese infrastructural ambitions.³ The action plan for Baku, Tehran, and Moscow focuses on modernizing infrastructure, streamlining trade, and fostering economic cooperation. This includes upgrading railways, ports, and highways, developing intermodal hubs and logistics centers, and implementing digital cargo tracking and management systems. Trade facilitation will be strengthened through simplified and harmonized customs procedures, aligned product standards, electronic clearance systems, and clear transit agreements. Operational efficiency will be supported by integrated multi-modal transport networks, consolidated cargo services, and standardized security and insurance mechanisms. Economic cooperation will be promoted through joint investment initiatives, trade promotion programs, and financial support for corridor operators. Technology and digitalization will enable smart border management, data sharing, and digital trade platforms, while environmental sustainability will be advanced through green transport initiatives and emission reduction measures. Implementation will be overseen by a trilateral working group, with performance monitored through defined metrics and periodic reviews, aiming to make the North-South Corridor a fast, reliable, and cost-efficient trade route connecting Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and beyond.⁴

In essence, the 3+3 embodies the contradictions of a post-imperial Caucasus: it aspires to regional ownership but remains haunted by asymmetric legacies and great-power custodianship. Its effectiveness will hinge on whether it can transcend these imperial residues and reimagine the South Caucasus as a space of plural sovereignty rather than contested periphery.

11. Implications for Georgia

The main factors determining Georgia's sense of security are rooted in a combination of historical, cultural, and political elements, especially national identity, language, religion, territorial integrity and foreign policy orientation. The core components are Fatherland in terms of a strong attachment to Georgia's land and territorial integrity is a primary element of national security awareness. The Georgian language is a key marker of national identity and a unifying factor, deeply tied to national security perceptions. Faith in the Orthodox church plays a historic and cultural role in fostering unity and a sense of belonging. Collective history and the shared experiences of struggle, foreign domination and independence shape a strong national narrative that influences security perspectives. Political independence and the desire for sovereignty and resistance to foreign influence especially from Russia are major motivators behind concerns about security. In terms of citizenship and inclusivity there is a shift toward civic, rather than purely ethnic understandings of security, particularly among younger generations, valuing inclusivity of minorities and civic engagement. National symbols flag and

³³ <https://www.meij.or.jp/english/research/2023/9.html>

⁴⁴ <https://caspianpost.com/regions/azerbaijan-iran-and-russia-to-form-working-group-to-enhance-north-south-corridor-traffic>

map and shared rituals evoke emotional unity and resilience. The perception of external enemies primarily Russia and the importance of Western institutions directly impact the national sense of security. Civil activism and public engagement and protest are increasingly seen as a ways to defend national security and identity. Social trust and media in terms of trust in political institutions and the media, shaped by recent history and international trends, influences how secure Georgians feel. These interwoven historical, cultural and contemporary political factors collectively shape the Georgian sense of security today.

Georgia's foreign policy since independence has been shaped by long-standing continuities that reflect both its geopolitical environment and its domestic aspirations. A central line of continuity has been the pursuit of integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, driven by the desire to consolidate sovereignty, ensure security, and distance the state from Russian dominance. Successive governments, regardless of their ideological orientation, have emphasized the strategic importance of deepening ties with The European Union and the NATO, framing Western alignment as both a safeguard against external threats and a vehicle for internal modernization. At the same time, Georgia has sought to present itself as a reliable partner in regional energy transit and connectivity, leveraging its geography to maintain relevance in broader European and Eurasian security dynamics.

The occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia to maintain a foothold in the region has imposed enduring constraints on Georgia's foreign policy. Tbilisi has had to balance assertive non-recognition policies with pragmatic conflict management strategies, aiming to prevent escalation while maintaining international support for its territorial integrity. Governments have differed in emphasis – so adopting a more openly confrontational stance towards Moscow, others experimenting with cautious dialogue . but all have been constrained by the reality of Russian military entrenchment in the occupied territories and Moscow's use of these conflicts as levers of influence. The result has been a persistent effort to internationalize the disputes, embed them within European and transatlantic diplomatic agendas, and frame them as challenges to the broader rules-based order rather than solely Georgian concerns.

In parallel, Georgia has consistently emphasized the Black Sea as a strategic extension of its foreign policy, positioning itself as both a connector between Europe and Asia,, Participation in the OSCE reflects a pragmatic strand in Tbilisi's policy posture, where engagement in multilateral frameworks – also The Three Seas – is viewed not only as an economic opportunity but also as a means of keeping diplomatic channels open in an otherwise fractured security environment. While Georgia remains wary of the limited effectiveness of such forums given Russia's presence, successive governments have nonetheless treated the Black Sea dimension as essential to their wider integrationist and balancing strategies.

Domestically, foreign policy objectives have often been complicated by political polarization, fragile democratic institutions, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Recurrent crises of governance and disputes over electoral legitimacy have at times weakened Georgia's credibility as a reform-oriented partner, slowing the +paceof integration with Western structures. Moreover, public support for Euro-Atlantic integration, while persistently high, has been tested by economic hardships, disillusionment with elite politics, and the limited tangible progress toward NATO and EU membership. The worst thing the EU can do is to isolate Tbilisi into believing Slavic modes of governance are superior to the alternative homegrown ones – a historical fact most eastern European native peoples have experienced.

The European Union is well placed to strengthen its role as a stabilizing partner for Georgia. Through deeper economic integration, targeted support for democratic consolidation, and a more visible security presence – particularly in monitoring and confidence building around the occupation lines – the EU can help mitigate the vulnerabilities created by Russia's presence. At the same time, sustained investment in resilience, connectivity, and civil society can reinforce Georgia's western trajectory while cautioning it against internal and external pressures. By calibrating its engagement to both the geopolitical realities and domestic challenges, the EU has the capacity to consolidate its position as Georgia's most consistent and transformative partner.

The Black Sea Dimension of Georgian Foreign Policy

The Black Sea dimension constitutes a central component of Georgia's foreign policy, reflecting the country's strategic geographic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This dimension encompasses strategic, economic, and security-oriented priorities, which are closely interlinked with Georgia's broader foreign policy objectives.

Strategic Significance

Georgia's location on the eastern coast of the Black Sea positions it as a key transit corridor and regional actor. The country seeks to enhance its influence within the Black Sea region by promoting connectivity, regional stability, and multilateral cooperation.

Security Considerations

The Black Sea dimension is intrinsically linked to Georgia's security agenda. Proximity to Russia and ongoing conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia underscore the strategic importance of maritime and coastal security. Georgia has invested in naval infrastructure and coast guard capabilities, while also strengthening partnerships with NATO and other Western actors through joint exercises and regional security initiatives.

Economic and Energy Aspects

The Black Sea dimension is central to Georgia's ambitions as a transit hub connecting the Caspian region with European markets. Key projects include the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the development of Black Sea ports such as Poti and Batumi. Participation in regional economic frameworks, particularly the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), facilitates trade, investment, and tourism development.

Diplomatic and Multilateral Engagement

Georgia actively engages in regional cooperation frameworks, including BSEC, GUAM, and the Black Sea Forum. While these initiatives enhance regional economic and diplomatic ties, Georgia simultaneously maintains a Western-oriented foreign policy, balancing relations with neighboring powers while pursuing integration into the European Union and NATO.

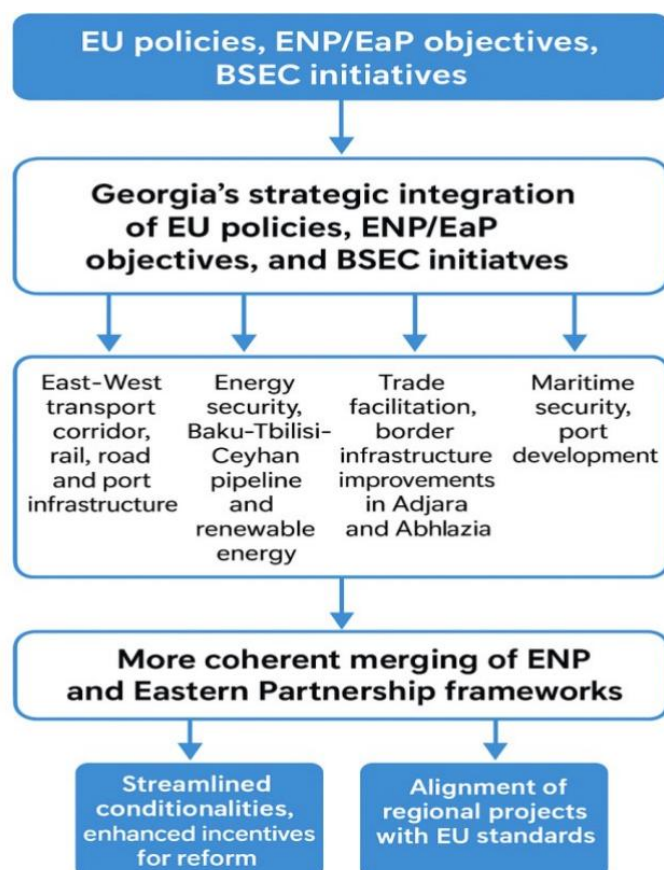
Georgia's engagement in the Black Sea region reflects a strategic integration of EU policies, ENP/EaP objectives, and BSEC initiatives. Key areas include the development of the East–West transport corridor, modernization of rail, road, and port infrastructure, and energy security

projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and renewable energy integration, which collectively enhance regional connectivity and resilience. Trade facilitation and border infrastructure improvements in Adjara and Abkhazia strengthen economic integration with Turkey and the EU, while maritime security and port development enhance regional safety and compliance with international standards. Complementary initiatives in tourism, cultural heritage, and ICT connectivity promote sustainable economic growth and digital integration.

Cross-border environmental management programs address regional ecological challenges, and conflict-sensitive development zones around South Ossetia and Abkhazia provide humanitarian and economic engagement, improving local livelihoods and governance. Collectively, these initiatives illustrate Georgia’s strategic use of multilateral frameworks to advance both regional development and its European integration aspirations, while a more coherent merging of the ENP and Eastern Partnership frameworks could further streamline conditionalities, enhance incentives for reform, and reinforce the alignment of regional projects with EU standards.

The European Union’s Eastern neighborhood represents a critical geopolitical frontier, encompassing six countries with diverse political trajectories. Policy fragmentation between the ENP and EaP has historically limited the EU’s strategic leverage in the region. Integrating these frameworks offers a coherent strategy to advance governance, security, and economic interests simultaneously. Institutional alignment ensures that democratic reforms and rule-of-law standards are applied consistently, reducing uncertainty and fostering compliance. Governance theory suggests that coherent institutions stabilize expectations and enhance policy effectiveness across borders. Frontex’s evolution demonstrates the EU’s capacity to operationalize border management, combining technical expertise with rapid-response capabilities. Embedding Frontex operations in EaP states strengthens external borders while promoting legal migration channels. This integration simultaneously mitigates irregular migration and bolsters internal EU security. Economic incentives, including trade facilitation and regulatory harmonization, increase interdependence and align Eastern partners with EU norms. A unified framework enhances the EU’s bargaining power in regional and multilateral engagements. Policy standardization through shared benchmarks allows for consistent monitoring of governance, trade, and migration outcomes. Joint KPIs and coordinated reporting cycles ensure accountability and transparency in implementation. Stakeholder engagement with national governments and civil society secures local ownership and legitimacy. The EU can extend its normative influence while fostering regional stability through these harmonized measures. Operational coherence reduces duplication of programs and maximizes the effectiveness of EU investments. Institutional theory underscores the value of interconnected frameworks for predictable and sustainable cooperation. Strategic integration strengthens the EU’s internal resilience while projecting stability externally. Unified policy initiatives support long-term geopolitical objectives in a complex and competitive neighborhood. In essence, merging ENP and EaP transforms fragmented initiatives into a robust, coherent, and strategically advantageous framework. Ultimately, this approach aligns institutional, security, and economic tools to serve the EU’s comprehensive internal and external interests.

Figure 5– ENP & EAP Merged



The Black Sea dimension of Georgian foreign policy can be characterized as a pragmatic and multilayered approach that combines economic integration, strategic transit ambitions, and security cooperation. By leveraging its geographic position, Georgia seeks to advance economic development and regional stability, while maintaining alignment with long-term Euro-Atlantic objectives. What is cannot do is to merge the ENP and EAP, a competing Polish-Swedish project to the BSEC.

Policy Recommendations for Overcoming the Deadlock in EU–Georgia Relations

The ongoing stalemate in EU–Georgia relations cannot be attributed solely to Georgia's domestic reforms or adaptation to EU conditionalities. While Georgia bears the responsibility to strengthen governance, rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and institutional alignment with EU standards, the European Union also bears partial responsibility due to procedural rigidity, inconsistent policy signals, and insufficient engagement with Georgia's specific geopolitical constraints. Overcoming this deadlock requires a mutual, adaptive approach that recognizes both Georgia's reform trajectory and the EU's capacity to provide realistic, context-sensitive pathways toward accession.

Georgia faces pressing needs to consolidate governance, strengthen the rule of law, combat corruption, and align its institutions with European Union standards. These reforms are critical not only for domestic stability but also for advancing Georgia's aspirations for European integration. At the same time, Georgia confronts persistent internal and external challenges, including territorial disputes over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces, and broader regional security tensions that complicate governance and economic development. Equally, the European Union bears partial responsibility due to procedural rigidity, inconsistent policy signals, and insufficient engagement with the specific geopolitical constraints facing Georgia. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires a partnership approach in which the EU actively adapts its policies to local realities while supporting Georgia's reform agenda. This entails providing context-sensitive incentives, facilitating dialogue over contested territories, and supporting conflict-sensitive development initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and institutional capacity. The EU can also foster cooperative mechanisms with Georgia in areas such as security, infrastructure, and trade, thereby creating tangible benefits that reinforce reform momentum. Mutual trust and sustained engagement are essential to overcome the current deadlock, ensuring that both parties share responsibility for progress. By combining support with realistic expectations and strategic alignment, the EU can position itself as an effective partner, enabling Georgia to navigate internal conflicts and regional pressures while advancing toward European integration.

The EU's Asks, Georgia's Asks, and a Possible Compromise Formula

The European Union has outlined a clear set of expectations for Georgia as part of its path toward membership and deeper integration. These expectations, often referred to as the "EU's asks," are centered on democratic reform, good governance, and alignment with European standards. The EU wants Georgia to reduce political polarization and foster genuine cooperation between the ruling party and the opposition. It emphasizes the need for free, fair, and transparent elections in which all political forces can compete without intimidation or irregularities. Judicial reform is another key requirement: courts must operate independently, with transparent procedures and without political interference.

The EU also insists on meaningful efforts to reduce oligarchic influence over politics, media, and the economy. Anti-corruption measures must be strengthened, with institutions capable of investigating and prosecuting wrongdoing. Another major expectation is the protection of independent media and civil society organizations, ensuring that journalists, NGOs, and activists can operate freely. Finally, Georgia is expected to uphold the rule of law, respect human rights and minority rights, and continue implementing the reforms outlined in its EU Association Agreement, aligning its legislation with the EU acquis.

On the other side, the Georgian government has articulated its own priorities and concerns — what might be called "Georgia's asks." Officials have stated that they are ready to meet the EU's reasonable and fair conditions, but they also want those conditions to respect Georgia's sovereignty and domestic decision-making. The government argues that the pace of reform should reflect the country's own readiness and capacity rather than external pressure. It has insisted that the EU's expectations must not amount to political interference or what it perceives as blackmail. Georgia has even declined some EU grants and financial aid packages when they came with conditions it considered excessive or misaligned with national interests. The ruling party also maintains that the country needs time to strengthen its economy and

institutions before moving forward with full accession talks, aiming for a timeline closer to 2028.

A viable compromise formula would need to balance the EU's push for democratic reform with Georgia's desire for sovereignty and gradual progress. This could take the form of a phased timeline, where reforms are implemented step by step with clear milestones and transparent monitoring. Independent observers and EU institutions could verify progress, but oversight mechanisms would be designed in partnership with Georgian authorities to ensure transparency and shared ownership. Reforms would proceed through Georgia's own legal and institutional processes, preserving national sovereignty while aligning outcomes with EU standards.

In this framework, the EU would offer financial and technical assistance tied to progress on specific reforms, while Georgia would commit to measurable actions in areas like electoral reform, judicial independence, and anti-corruption. To foster trust and stability, the EU could help facilitate dialogue between the government and opposition, supporting joint efforts to reduce polarization and establish fair rules for elections and media regulation. In return, Georgia would engage constructively in these processes and implement agreed reforms within the established timeline.

The compromise would also need credible incentives. The EU should guarantee that real progress will lead to tangible benefits — such as the opening of accession talks, greater access to EU programs, or expanded economic cooperation. Georgia, in turn, would need to demonstrate consistent political will, ensuring that its commitments are not just rhetorical but reflected in institutional practice.

This kind of arrangement could bridge the current divide between Brussels and Tbilisi. It would allow the EU to uphold its standards without alienating a pro-European population, and it would enable Georgia to advance toward integration at a sustainable pace while preserving national dignity. The challenge lies in ensuring that the process remains genuine — not an excuse for delay or a tool for political advantage — but a shared path toward a stronger, more democratic, and more European Georgia. Failure to appreciate the nuances in the relationship by shouting backsliding and interference to each other could send Georgia into Moscow's deadly embrace, without even having addressed Georgia's sense of security, even as its geopolitical station and constructive contribution to European security is being ignored through failure of dialogue and mutual understanding and accommodation.

Given the persistent divergence between the European Union's stringent reform expectations and the reservations or resistance demonstrated by the Georgian government, it becomes imperative to construct a nuanced compromise framework. Such a framework would seek to bridge the gap by outlining a mutually acceptable path forward that accommodates the core concerns of both parties. This entails a careful balancing act, wherein the EU's commitment to democratic standards and rule-of-law principles is upheld, while simultaneously recognizing the political and institutional constraints faced by the Georgian authorities. Moreover, this approach necessitates an explicit acknowledgment of the trade-offs inherent in the process: certain demands may need to be moderated or phased over time to ensure practical implementation and sustainable progress. Ultimately, the goal is to foster constructive dialogue

and collaboration that enable tangible reforms without exacerbating political tensions or undermining the legitimacy of either side..

Table 8: Possible Compromise Formula

Component	What EU would likely ask for in this formula	What Georgia might accept / ask for in return
Phased Timeline	EU agrees to a structured timeline for reforms (e.g. set milestones over 1-2 years) rather than insisting on immediate compliance across all areas.	Georgia accepts specific reforms in elections, judiciary, anti-corruption as early milestones; holds off some others until later phases.
Mutual Oversight / Monitoring	Independent observers, EU commissions, civil society oversight to verify progress.	Georgia insists that monitoring criteria are transparent and agreed in advance; perhaps co-led by Georgian bodies.
Respect for Sovereignty / Domestic Process	EU allows for reforms to be crafted through Georgian legal/institutional procedures, not externally imposed laws.	Georgia commits to align its laws and institutions with EU norms, but retains control over how exactly to adapt them.
Conditional Financial / Technical Assistance	EU offers targeted support (funding, capacity-building) contingent on meeting certain reform milestones.	Georgia agrees to accept this aid if conditions are reasonable, and if they help build capacity rather than being punitive.
Dialogue and De-polarization Mechanisms	EU helps facilitate mediation between government and opposition, supports negotiation of shared rules for elections, media regulation, etc.	Georgia government engages with opposition in meaningful dialogue; perhaps agrees on certain electoral law changes or independent commissions.
Assurance & Incentives	EU offers credible incentives (accession schedules, financial and EU	Georgia obtains assurances that meeting the agreed steps will lead to concrete benefits (e.g. accession

	integration benefits) tied to performance.	talks, visa regime stability, etc.).
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Risks / Tensions in the Compromise

It is imperative to ensure that external pressure, while reasonable, does not escalate into de facto interference in domestic affairs. Such a balance is crucial to maintain the sovereignty and legitimacy of the reform process. Furthermore, vigilance is required to prevent governmental actors from employing delay tactics or issuing vague promises as mechanisms to stall or circumvent necessary reforms. This undermines both the pace and the integrity of transformative efforts.

Equally important is the preservation of the European Union’s credibility. The EU must consistently honor its commitments by delivering promised incentives promptly upon the achievement of designated milestones. Failure to do so risks diminishing the Union’s influence and the trust of its partners.

Finally, managing public expectations constitutes a vital component of the reform process. Citizens generally demand swift and tangible progress; thus, protracted delays or perceived inertia can significantly erode public trust and support for the reform agenda. Effective communication and transparent timelines are therefore essential to sustain engagement and legitimacy throughout the process.

Implications: How Georgia Can Remain Democratic

To remain democratic, Georgia must focus on maintaining electoral integrity. Independent election commissions should be strengthened to prevent political interference, and transparency in vote counting and reporting must be increased. Data-driven audits can help detect and deter electoral fraud, while fair districting and equal access to voting ensure that all citizens are properly represented.

Equally important is reinforcing checks and balances. The independence of the judiciary should be protected through nonpartisan appointments and secure tenure for judges. Parliament must have the authority and resources to hold the executive branch accountable, and the use of emergency powers should always remain within constitutional limits to prevent abuse.

A healthy democracy also depends on protecting information and accountability. Independent, fact-based journalism should be supported to counter misinformation and propaganda. Government decisions and data should be made transparent, allowing citizens to evaluate public officials. Academic and press freedom must be safeguarded so that open debate and evidence-based policymaking can thrive.

Georgia should continue to encourage political competition and participation. Barriers that prevent new political parties from forming should be reduced, and campaign finance must remain transparent to avoid oligarchic influence. Civic education is essential to ensure that

citizens understand their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society and can make informed decisions at the ballot box.

Finally, Georgia must uphold the rule of law and adhere to international democratic norms. This includes following recognized election and human rights standards, resisting the concentration of power in any single branch of government, and protecting the rights of opposition parties. Reforms should be guided by evidence and inclusive public dialogue rather than partisan interest.

In summary, Georgia's democratic future depends on strong institutions, transparent governance, political pluralism, and an informed, engaged citizenry. Only by upholding these principles can the country preserve and strengthen its democratic character.

Georgia -Between The Great Powers

Georgia can strategically capitalize on Turkey's trading advantage and logistical networks, particularly in Adjara and Abkhazia, to enhance economic integration with European markets. Expanding cross-border trade facilitation programs and modernizing customs procedures in Adjara would strengthen economic flows, while joint infrastructure projects linking Abkhazia's Black Sea ports to regional energy and transport corridors could be implemented under EU technical and financial assistance. Collaboration on energy security initiatives, particularly ensuring the resilience of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and associated transit routes, could include EU-backed security monitoring and investment in infrastructure upgrades.

Consideration should be given to how to engage Russia in South Ossetia before addressing the broader ethnic conflict and Tbilisi's relations with the PKF. Early engagement with Russia could help establish frameworks for dialogue, reduce escalation risks, and create conditions for more effective conflict management and cooperation with Tbilisi."centives for cooperation and contribute to stabilizing the operational environment.

Strengthening the EU–Georgia strategic dialogue is equally critical. The EU could adopt a more flexible, context-sensitive approach, offering clearer benchmarks, phased integration, and technical assistance tailored to Georgia's geopolitical and economic realities. Establishing joint task forces with EU and Georgian representatives to accelerate infrastructure, energy, and trade projects would ensure that EU support directly strengthens Georgia's regional leverage while signaling tangible benefits from reforms.

Furthermore, Georgia could frame BSEC projects in transport, trade, and energy as complementary to the EU accession agenda, emphasizing alignment with EU regulatory standards and sustainability goals. Multi-modal transport corridors linking Black Sea ports to European markets, energy diversification schemes integrating Georgian renewable potential, and maritime security collaboration in coordination with NATO and EU frameworks represent concrete ways to reinforce Georgia's strategic value to the EU.

In summary, overcoming the deadlock in EU–Georgia relations requires shared responsibility. Georgia must continue substantive reforms, while the EU must calibrate its accession approach to reflect geopolitical realities and offer concrete incentives. By leveraging Turkey's trade networks, enhancing energy and pipeline security, and integrating regional stability initiatives

around Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia can demonstrate both reform capacity and strategic utility, thereby making the EU accession process more credible and actionable.

Even in contested areas such as South Ossetia, policy initiatives could focus on creating humanitarian and small-scale economic engagement zones under EU-Turkey oversight, fostering connectivity and reducing local economic isolation without implying political recognition. Infrastructure projects in buffer zones, including improved transportation and communication links, would enhance security monitoring and civilian mobility. Conflict-prevention and early-warning systems supported by the EU and international partners could further contribute to regional stability.

The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline System (TAPSA) currently operates through regions with varying degrees of political control, including areas influenced by Russian interests. This operational reality poses significant challenges to the EU's energy security objectives, as reliance on infrastructure passing through such territories can be seen as incompatible with the EU's goal of reducing exposure to Russian influence. The EU has established several initiatives aimed at enhancing pipeline security and reducing dependence on Russian-controlled energy routes. However, the existing operations of TAPSA through politically sensitive regions highlight the ongoing challenges in achieving these objectives. Continued investment in alternative infrastructure and strategic planning will be essential to ensure the EU's energy security in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics.

The shifting of the border in the southern sector of South Ossetia can be understood as a consequence of historical, demographic, and geopolitical factors. During the Soviet period, administrative boundaries were delineated with limited attention to ethnic distribution or geographic coherence, leaving the southern region characterized by a mixed population of Ossetians and Georgians. Subsequent adjustments in the post-Soviet period reflect efforts by de facto authorities, often supported by external actors, to consolidate control over Ossetian-majority settlements and strategically important areas. These movements have been influenced by considerations of security, access to critical infrastructure, and the positioning of military forces, resulting in a de facto reconfiguration of the border that is not formally recognized in international law. The fluidity of the southern boundary thus underscores the complex interaction between ethnic composition, territorial control, and regional security dynamics. A comprehensive approach to resolving the territorial and security issues in southern South Ossetia requires the careful balancing of the interests of all relevant actors, including Tbilisi, the de facto South Ossetian authorities, Russia, and international peacekeeping forces. This entails establishing inclusive dialogue mechanisms that allow each party to articulate security, political, and humanitarian concerns in a structured environment. Confidence-building measures, such as joint monitoring of contested areas, coordinated humanitarian initiatives, and the involvement of neutral third-party observers, can reduce tensions and create mutual trust.

Concurrently, multilateral frameworks should seek to reconcile territorial control with the protection of local populations, ensuring that solutions respect both de facto governance arrangements and internationally recognized borders. The resolution process must therefore integrate diplomatic negotiation, security coordination, and practical cooperation, creating a phased and adaptive pathway that accounts for the interests and incentives of all stakeholders.

Institutionalized dialogue mechanisms can be established to create structured and recurring forums between Georgian authorities and the Russian PKF. Such mechanisms enhance communication, reduce the likelihood of misperceptions, and provide a predictable framework for addressing security-related incidents, forming a central component of confidence-building in post-conflict contexts.

Joint monitoring and verification initiatives, including collaborative patrols or observation posts, can increase transparency and foster mutual accountability regarding ceasefire compliance. The involvement of neutral third-party observers can further strengthen legitimacy and reduce the potential for unilateral escalations.

Incremental humanitarian and infrastructure cooperation, through non-political and practical projects such as the rehabilitation of shared infrastructure, assistance to displaced populations, or coordinated demining efforts, can serve as confidence-building measures. These initiatives create tangible incentives.

The Middle Corridor offers a strategic transit route linking China, the Caspian region, the South Caucasus, and Europe, providing an alternative to routes that pass through Russian territory. Its significance lies not only in trade efficiency but also in enhancing the resilience and diversification of regional supply chains. Leveraging this corridor requires coordinated investments in infrastructure, including rail networks, logistics hubs, and border-crossing facilities. Harmonization of technical standards and streamlined customs procedures across transit states is essential to reduce delays and maximize throughput. Engagement with China should be guided by alignment between Chinese investment objectives and local development priorities, ensuring that corridor projects support sustainable economic growth. Multilateral cooperation with European partners can embed the corridor within broader trade and energy networks, enhancing regional connectivity while reducing dependency on a single route. Practical initiatives may include joint transport ventures, public-private partnerships, and coordinated regulatory frameworks. Security and political considerations must be integrated into planning to protect infrastructure from disruption and to maintain stability in transit regions. Strategic leverage also arises from the corridor's potential to strengthen regional influence and economic interdependence, creating incentives for cooperative behavior among transit states. Ultimately, a phased, adaptive strategy that combines infrastructure development, diplomatic engagement, and multilateral coordination is required to fully realize the corridor's economic and geopolitical potential.

Harnessing EU Connectivity to Georgia's Accession Partnership

Connectivity concerns differ from security concerns in several ways. Connectivity focuses on how reliable and available a network or system is, while security is about protecting data from data and resources from extra-territorial threats and unauthorized access. Connectivity concerns involve issues like bandwidth, uptime, interoperability and access, aiming to ensure seamless communication between devices and systems. In contrast, security concerns emphasizing safeguarding against data breaches, malware and attacks that compromise confidentiality, integrity and availability. Connectivity is mainly about the quality of the connection, whereas security is about defending against potential harm. Ultimately, while

connectivity enables communication, security ensures that this communication remains protected from adversaries.

Having said that, the primary objective of EU connectivity investments and guarantee/grant instruments to achieve rapid, tangible socio-economic improvements in Georgia across transport, energy, digital infrastructure, and governance. This approach aims simultaneously to strengthen Georgia's accession-reform incentives and institutional capacity while consolidating the value of regional corridors such as the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea for the EU and its partners.

Georgia's strategic role as a transit gateway between the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the EU makes timely action crucial. EU instruments including the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Global Gateway, IPA/IPA-III, and financing from the EIB and EBRD already target relevant sectors and can be oriented to combine practical connectivity outcomes with accession-related conditionality.

The EU should adopt a strategic, conditional partnership model that combines positive incentives such as accelerated project delivery and Team Europe packages with clearly defined political benchmarks in rule-of-law, public procurement, and anti-corruption. This approach preserves leverage while delivering visible benefits. Coordination under Team Europe, integrating the Commission, EEAS, Member States, EIB/EBRD, and private partners, reduces fragmentation and accelerates disbursement. Project selection should balance geopolitical interests with local legitimacy by prioritizing initiatives that generate immediate social and economic benefits, while retaining flexibility to suspend support in the event of political backsliding.

TEN-T rail and road upgrades aim to reduce transit times, increase freight capacity, and lower transport costs, financed through CEF transport funds, EIB/EBRD loans, and IPA grants for complementary reforms. Digital border and e-customs initiatives will cut dwell times, enhance traceability, and reduce corruption rents, supported by CEF-Digital, Global Gateway digital funding, IPA technical assistance, and private telco co-investment. Energy interconnectors and green projects, including grid upgrades and pilot hydrogen projects, will diversify supplies, increase export potential, and improve energy security, leveraging CEF-Energy, Global Gateway blended finance, and EIB/EBRD lending with advisory support. Logistics hubs, Ro-Ro ferries, and multimodal terminals will enable higher-value trade and job creation, financed via EIB/EBRD loans, Global Gateway co-financing, and EU-supported PPP structuring. Governance support, encompassing rule-of-law, procurement, judiciary, anti-corruption, and media freedom initiatives, strengthens institutions essential for accession and enhances absorptive capacity, using IPA/IPA-III grants and differentiated conditionality frameworks. Climate and rural resilience measures, including irrigation, water infrastructure, and social inclusion initiatives, will boost rural incomes and reduce climate-induced migration, supported by Global Gateway climate windows, IPA social measures, and EIB green financing.

The chart presents a structured overview of transnational infrastructure and development projects categorized under three strategic umbrellas: Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Global Gateway, and the Middle Corridor. Each initiative reflects a distinct geopolitical and economic rationale, yet they converge on a shared ambition—to reconfigure the connective tissue between Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

The Connecting Europe Facility emphasizes integration within the EU's extended neighborhood, focusing on transport, energy, and digital corridors. Projects such as the Western Caucasus TEN-T rail upgrade in Georgia and the Black Sea Subsea Power Cable in Armenia are emblematic of efforts to embed peripheral regions into the EU's core infrastructure network. These undertakings are not merely logistical; they are symbolic gestures of inclusion, drawing distant geographies closer through steel, fiber, and electricity.

Table 9 – Engaging Georgia by opening-up to Armenia

	Impact*	Funding	Dör	Energy	Limited
A. Connecting Europe / CEF					
A1 Western Caucasus TEN-T rail upgrade	Georgia	●	●	●	● EIP PPP
A2 Black Sea Subsea Power Cable	Armenia	●	●	●	● EIB
A3 Digital Border Corridor	Türkiye	●	●	●	● PPP
B1 Global Gateway	Iran	●	●	●	● BBRD
B1 South Caucasus Green H ₂ Hub	Georgia	●	●	●	● EIB
B2 Central Asia-EU Digital Backbone	Azerbaijan	●	●	●	● EBR
B3 Climate-Resilient Irrigation (ARM/GE)	ARM/GE	●	●	●	● National
C. Middle Corridor					
C1 Caspian Ro-Ro Ferries + Terminals	Azerbaijan	●	●	●	● EBRD
C2 Transit Customs Corridor (TITR)	Georgia	●	●	●	● ADB
C3 Logistics & Multimodal Hubs	Georgia	●	●	●	● PPP
D. EU Black Sea strategy					
D1 Black Sea Maritime Security Hub	ErayuT	●	●	●	● EU Black
D2 Armenia-Georgia Energy Interconnector	Georgia ta	●	●	●	● DG MOVE
D3 Resilient Ports Partnership	NATO	●	●	●	● ABRD
E1 Armenia-Georgia Rail & Road Upgrade	EIB o.to	●	●	●	● Private

Global Gateway, by contrast, operates as the EU's external investment arm, designed to counterbalance competing global influences through strategic partnerships. Initiatives like the South Caucasus Green Hydrogen Hub in Iran and the Central Asia-EU Digital Backbone in Azerbaijan signal a pivot toward sustainability and digital sovereignty. The unexpected twist here lies in the EU's willingness to engage with politically complex regions, suggesting that infrastructure diplomacy may be the quiet antidote to geopolitical fragmentation.

The Middle Corridor represents a pragmatic response to shifting trade dynamics, particularly in light of disruptions to traditional Eurasian routes. Projects such as Caspian Ro-Ro terminals in Kazakhstan and the Transit Customs Corridor in Georgia aim to streamline east-west transit, offering alternatives that bypass contested territories. What appears at first glance to be a logistical rerouting is, in fact, a recalibration of influence—where ports and railways become instruments of soft power.

Funding sources, ranging from the European Investment Bank to NATO partnerships, reveal a mosaic of financial and political interests. The presence of symbols like DG MOVE and NDICI underscores the bureaucratic complexity behind these initiatives, yet also hints at a deeper truth: that modern infrastructure is no longer just about roads and cables, but about values, alliances, and strategic foresight.

In sum, the chart is more than a ledger of projects—it is a map of ambition. It captures a moment in which connectivity is not just a technical goal but a political statement. And somewhere between the hydrogen hubs and maritime security strategies, one begins to see the contours of a new kind of diplomacy—quiet, infrastructural, and profoundly consequential.

Partnering with The Three Seas Initiative

Romania is one of the leading forces in bringing Bruxelles’ attention to the need for the investments in the space between the Adriatic, Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. The Initiative is designed to promote cooperation between 13 EU-members and their partners transport, energy and digital infrastructure connections on the north-south axis in the eastern part of the European Union.

The 10th Summit of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), held in Warsaw on April 29, 2025, culminated in a Joint Declaration that articulates a strategic framework for advancing infrastructure connectivity across Central and Eastern Europe. Central to the Declaration is the recognition of the 3SI Investment Fund (3SIIF) as a key instrument for financing regional development projects. The Fund is positioned as a vehicle to address infrastructure gaps and enhance economic resilience by attracting both public and private investments. Its focus spans critical sectors such as energy, transport, and digital infrastructure, reflecting an ambition to integrate the 3SI region more closely with broader European networks.

The Declaration emphasizes the importance of aligning 3SI initiatives with European Union policies and strategies, particularly the European Green Deal and the Trans-European Networks. It underscores the need for synergy with EU financial instruments, including initiatives such as the Global Gateway, to ensure that regional projects contribute to the cohesion and strategic objectives of the EU. By framing 3SI efforts within the EU’s policy architecture, the Declaration signals an intent to deepen partnership and coordination, thereby enhancing the initiative’s legitimacy and operational effectiveness.

Regional connectivity emerges as a core priority, with the Declaration highlighting key projects that are expected to have significant economic and strategic impact. Initiatives such as BRUA, the LNG terminal on Krk Island, Rail Baltica, Rail2Sea, and Via Baltica are presented as exemplars of targeted infrastructure development, while the synchronization of the Baltic States’ electricity grids with continental European networks demonstrates progress in energy integration. These projects collectively aim to foster economic growth, enhance logistical efficiency, and strengthen regional resilience in the face of geopolitical uncertainties.

The Declaration also addresses the evolving geopolitical landscape and the potential expansion of the 3SI to include additional countries. While this reflects a forward-looking vision for regional cooperation, it raises questions regarding the readiness of potential new members and the geopolitical implications of such an enlargement. The Declaration, while rich in strategic intent, provides limited detail regarding implementation mechanisms and operational governance, leaving open the challenge of translating ambitious goals into actionable outcomes.

Evaluation of the Declaration indicates several strengths. The clarity of strategic direction, the commitment to alignment with EU priorities, and the focus on high-impact infrastructure

projects contribute to a coherent vision for the 3SI's role in regional development. At the same time, the lack of explicit mechanisms for implementation and monitoring, alongside the need for more structured engagement with private sector actors, represents areas for improvement. Strengthening partnerships with the EU could be achieved through the establishment of a permanent coordinating secretariat, the development of detailed action plans with clear timelines and responsibilities, and the creation of incentives to attract private investment to the 3SIIF. Regular assessments of projects and strategic alignment would further enhance accountability and ensure that the initiative adapts effectively to evolving economic and geopolitical contexts.⁴

Figure 6 – The Middle Corridor



China has shown interest in developing port infrastructure in Georgia, particularly around Anaklia and other Black Sea access points. The goal is to secure a strategic maritime foothold on the Black Sea, complementing overland BRI routes through Central Asia and South Caucasus. A Georgian hub would give China a direct link to European markets, bypassing chokepoints and diversifying trade corridors. It also provides logistics and energy transit advantages, strengthening China's role in regional supply chains. The rationale combines economic outreach with geopolitical influence, expanding China's presence in a region where EU, NATO and Russia already compete.

The Caucasus is a crucial piece in the Middle Corridor, both economically in terms of transport, pipelines, trade flow, and geopolitically so long as Turkey and China must balance relations with Russia, the EU and local states. Turkey's policy towards the region reflects both historical ties in relation to Turkic, cultural and religious and strategic calculations energy routes, connectivity balancing both Western and Eastern influence. Georgia is a strategic space where the Middle Corridor and BRI intersect in relation to transit, connectivity and as part of regional balancing between Russia, China and Europe and influence zones. In navigating its relationship with China Ankara balances the EU and NATO notably in relation to infrastructure, trade and diplomacy. For Georgia it is important to ensure the economic relationship with China is fair, transparent and benefits Georgia and understand the impacts on critical infrastructure and sovereignty, states a US State Department official.

Poland had acquired a reputation for being more hoarding than Spain, more intergovernmentalist than France and more Atlanticist than the UK. By taking the initiative for a 3SI-fund the 13 investment-starved states signal they are serious – not just supplicants.

Overall, the 2025 Joint Declaration positions the Three Seas Initiative as a pivotal framework for regional connectivity and economic resilience. Its success, however, will depend on the capacity to operationalize the strategic vision, engage a broad range of stakeholders, and maintain robust alignment with European Union priorities.

A number of infrastructure projects under the Three Seas Initiative provide opportunities for meaningful partnership between the EU and the 3SI Investment Fund, both in terms of financing and strategic alignment with EU priorities. Five illustrative cases stand out.

The **Rail Baltica project** represents one of the flagship undertakings of the 3SI region, linking the Baltic States with the European rail network through a high-speed, interoperable rail corridor.

Given its role in advancing the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), the EU has already committed significant funding, but deeper cooperation with the 3SI Fund could accelerate implementation and ensure long-term financial sustainability, operationalize the strategic vision, engage a broad range of stakeholders, and maintain robust alignment with European Union priorities.

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The **Rail2Sea project** provides a complementary effort by establishing a north–south rail corridor connecting the port of Constanța on the Black Sea with the port of Gdańsk on the Baltic Sea. This project aligns with EU priorities on transport diversification and resilience while also creating a vital economic artery for Central and Eastern Europe. EU partnership would reinforce its transcontinental dimension and mobilize additional resources.

In the field of energy security, the **BRUA pipeline**—connecting Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Austria—has the potential to enhance regional gas interconnectivity and reduce dependency on a limited number of suppliers. While EU funds have already supported segments of the project, closer cooperation with the 3SI Fund could facilitate its completion, maintenance, and adaptation to future hydrogen transport, thereby integrating energy transition objectives with security of supply.

The **LNG terminal on Krk Island in Croatia** constitutes another critical project where EU–3SI collaboration is both natural and necessary. As part of the EU’s diversification strategy for gas imports, this infrastructure provides resilience against supply disruptions and opens up new energy markets. Joint EU–3SI financing could extend its capacity and ensure integration with cross-border interconnectors, making it a true regional hub.

Finally, the **Via Carpathia road corridor** seeks to establish a modern north–south highway system linking Lithuania to Greece through the Carpathian arc. By improving connectivity for landlocked regions, this project directly supports EU cohesion goals, regional development, and the reduction of disparities within the Union. A partnership between EU funds and the 3SIIF would be instrumental in ensuring timely completion, uniform standards, and enhanced accessibility for peripheral regions.

Taken together, these five projects illustrate how a coordinated EU–3SI financing and policy framework could translate shared strategic goals into tangible outcomes. They combine the EU’s structural and cohesion instruments with the flexible investment approach of the 3SI Fund, making them prime candidates for deepened collaboration.

Building on the core infrastructure priorities of the Three Seas Initiative, there is also scope to extend cooperation toward Georgia, which has emerged as a pivotal partner on the eastern flank of Europe. The country’s role as a Black Sea gateway positions it strategically within EU connectivity frameworks, particularly in light of the European Commission’s Global Gateway strategy and the emphasis on diversifying trade and energy corridors. Several projects offer a natural platform for triangular cooperation among Georgia, the 3SI, and the EU.

The most prominent example is the **Black Sea Submarine Electricity Cable**, an ambitious project that would link Georgia to Romania via a subsea high-voltage cable, thereby connecting the South Caucasus directly to the EU energy market. The project is already supported politically by both Georgia and Romania, and with EU and 3SI investment, it could become a backbone of regional energy diversification and renewable integration.

Complementing this is the **Middle Corridor transport route**, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, which runs from Central Asia through the South Caucasus and across the Black Sea to Romania or Bulgaria, linking into the broader 3SI region. By coordinating investment in port upgrades at Poti and Anaklia in Georgia with improvements along the Rail2Sea and Via Carpathia corridors, the EU and 3SI could integrate this east–west route with the north– south connectivity that is central to the 3SI vision.

A further opportunity lies in **digital connectivity infrastructure**, particularly the planned Black Sea Fiber Optic Cable that would run between Georgia and EU member states. This project would strengthen cybersecurity, reduce dependency on non-European data routes, and enhance resilience. Linking it to 3SI digital projects would create synergies across Central Europe, the Baltics, and the Black Sea.

In maritime transport, investment in **intermodal hubs linking Georgian ports to European inland waterways and rail systems** could complement 3SI flagship projects. A coordinated effort would not only diversify Europe’s maritime routes but also bring Georgia into the same logistical networks that connect the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas.

Lastly, the **Southern Gas Corridor extensions and hydrogen-ready infrastructure** offer another avenue of cooperation. By aligning Georgian energy transit routes with 3SI priorities such as the BRUA pipeline and Krk LNG, the EU could build a coherent eastern energy strategy that combines security with the decarbonisation agenda.

Together, these projects highlight the potential for Georgia to act as a bridge between the 3SI region and the EU's eastern neighbourhood. By pooling the investment capacity of the 3SI Fund with EU instruments such as the Connecting Europe Facility and the Global Gateway, and by anchoring Georgia's projects in this wider framework, both resilience and integration would be enhanced.

Demonstrating Accession Synergy

Every major investment should map directly to accession benchmarks and measurable KPIs through a Project Accession Matrix, linking project outputs to socio-economic indicators, accession criteria, funding tranche conditionality, and monitoring metrics. IPA differentiation allows performance-based support, tying access to verified governance reforms. Team Europe project packs integrate grants, concessional loans, and private equity into named "Georgia Accession Partnership Projects," making political ownership explicit. Independent verification and public dashboards ensure transparency and domestic legitimacy, while quick-win flagship projects such as e-customs or visible infrastructure improvements generate early public support for reform.

Operational Roadmap

Phase 0 (0–6 months) focuses on project preparation, diagnostics, and PAM development. Phase 1 (6–18 months) implements quick wins and governance reforms. Phase 2 (18–60 months) delivers larger capex projects such as Ro-Ro ferries, energy interconnectors, and logistics hubs through blended Global Gateway and EIB/EBRD financing. Phase 3 consolidates results, links project delivery to further IPA tranches, and publishes dashboards and independent audits.

Risks and Mitigation

Political backsliding can be managed by maintaining non-political support while pausing high-governance projects and engaging subnational authorities. Financial non-bankability of green projects can be addressed through preparatory grants and blended finance. Regional geopolitical risks require transparent commercial rules, regional cooperation forums, and security risk assessments, ensuring that projects remain primarily economic.

Key KPIs

KPIs include the number of accession-relevant benchmarks advanced within 24 months, reductions in freight transit time, increases in port throughput, energy interconnector capacity deployed, CO₂ avoided, fully electronic customs processing, reductions in border dwell times, verified procurement compliance, and improved business perceptions of corruption.

Illustrative Team Europe Package

The Georgia Accession Connectivity Pack would integrate rail and e-customs investments, energy interconnector preparation, and social resilience measures, with disbursement linked to procurement and judiciary progress checkpoints.

Summary

In the Georgian imagination, the Black Sea has always been more than a geographic frontier, it is a symbolic gateway to Europe and a stage upon which sovereignty and identity are projected. To Tbilisi, the sea is not merely a body of water but a corridor of connection, a space where commerce, culture and security intersect. By invoking the Black Sea, Georgian leaders frame their nation not as a periphery, but as a pivot – bridging East and West, North and South. The policy posture toward the BSEC, therefore, is not a passive exercise in multilateralism but a strategic assertion: a declaration that Georgia belongs firmly in the architecture of regional cooperation, even when adversarial neighbours try to exclude or diminish its role. Engagement in the BSEC allows Tbilisi to signal its commitment to dialogue without renouncing its Euro-Atlantic trajectory, to participate in collective economic projects while resisting coercion, and to demonstrate resilience in the face of asymmetric pressures. The Black Sea becomes, in this vision, not a contested margin but a shared space, where Georgia insists on being present, relevant and future-oriented. It is precisely here at the confluence of regional and geopolitical ambition – that the enduring threads of Georgia's foreign policy find one of their most eloquent expressions.

The EU and the US should address Georgia's security challenges by adopting a coordinated, firm and values-driven approach that restores democratic progress, deters authoritarian drift, and resists Russian influence.

First, they must immediately communicate and coordinate joint policies to avoid mixed signals and confusion within Georgia. Second, condemn anti-democratic actions and hold the Georgian government accountable for abuses and restrictions on rights. Third, demand transparent investigations into electoral irregularities and repeal laws restricting assembly and expression.

Fourth, increase direct engagement with Georgia civil society to bolster democratic forces. Fifth, expand support for independent media and counter disinformation, especially Russian propaganda. Sixth, use targeted sanctions or political restrictions on individuals responsible for democratic backsliding. Seventh, reaffirm security commitments, enhance defense cooperation, and improve resilience against hybrid threats. Eighth, make EU's enlargement incentive as leverage, while conditioning progress on concrete reforms, without threat of exclusion. Ninth, strengthen economic ties, prioritizing projects that benefit citizens rather than entrenched elites. Tenth, develop a joint strategic vision for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future, linking interests with core democratic values.

By undertaking these steps complemented by a considerable and thoughtful strengthening of governance in the Black Sea, the EU and EU can better support Georgia's democratic aspirations and regional stability.

10. Comparing China, Russia & Turkey in Caucasus

Russia, Turkey, and China pursue markedly different strategies in the South Caucasus, each reflecting distinct geopolitical traditions and priorities. The Kremlin adopts a strategy that is primarily security-driven, with a strong emphasis on maintaining regional dominance and preventing deeper integration of the Caucasus states into Euro-Atlantic structures. Moscow's leverage is expressed through military presence, including bases and peacekeeping forces, as well as through the management of so-called frozen conflicts such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Economically, Russia continues to rely on its energy resources and arms trade, while culturally it deploys Russophone media, religious institutions, and diaspora connections to sustain influence. In institutional terms, Moscow promotes regionalism through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), albeit often coercively—an architecture that might be described as a disciplinary embrace.

Turkey, by contrast, emphasizes identity politics, cultural ties, and its role as an energy transit corridor. Ankara's engagement with the Caucasus is grounded in its linguistic and religious proximity, particularly to Azerbaijan, which it supports not only through rhetoric but also through military cooperation and arms transfers. Economically, Turkey has developed infrastructure and trade partnerships while promoting pipelines such as Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) and TANAP as arteries of a regional body whose lifeblood is energy. Soft power is reinforced through scholarships, cultural diplomacy, and Turkish media. Institutionally, Turkey participates in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and engages bilaterally in the Caucasus, positioning itself as both a partner and, at times, a challenger to Russian influence.

China's strategy is more circumscribed, reflecting Beijing's preference for economic engagement and political neutrality. Unlike Russia or Turkey, China avoids direct involvement in regional conflicts, framing its presence as one of stability and mutual benefit. Its initiatives are largely focused on infrastructure development, loans, and expanding trade partnerships, embedded within the Belt and Road Initiative. Security commitments remain minimal, but China complements its economic role with soft power instruments, including Confucius Institutes and educational exchanges. Institutionally, Beijing engages bilaterally and through broader frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), prioritizing long-term connectivity over political entanglement—in which the restless patience of China's strategy places the turbulence not on Beijing but on the very passage of time in the region.

Russia relies mainly on hard power and coercion.

Turkey pursues a mix of identity politics and energy corridor diplomacy.

China focuses on economic infrastructure while maintaining political neutrality.

For the European Union, the most effective approach lies in combining normative credibility with a smart energy strategy and a reinforced multilateral engagement through the BSEC, thereby positioning itself as a neutral yet reliable partner

Table 10 – Comparing China, Russia & Turkey’s attitude in the Caucasus

Dimension	Russia	Turkey	China
Strategic Interests	Maintain security dominance, buffer zone against NATO/EU, control over conflicts (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia)	Expand regional influence, cultural/linguistic ties (esp. Azerbaijan), energy transit hub role	Secure energy/resources, expand Belt & Road connectivity, avoid entanglement in conflicts
Economic Engagement	Strong energy leverage (gas pipelines, electricity), arms trade	Energy transit corridor (BTC pipeline, TANAP), trade & construction investments	Infrastructure finance (roads, railways), loans, growing trade partnerships
Security/Military Role	Military bases, peacekeeping forces, security guarantor (often coercive)	Military cooperation with Azerbaijan, arms sales, limited peacekeeping	No military role; focuses on economic-security nexus (investments, tech)
Soft Power / Normative Tools	Russophone media, Orthodox Church, diaspora ties, coercive diplomacy	Cultural/religious ties (Turkic identity, Islam), scholarships, TV/media	“No strings attached” development model, Confucius Institutes, emphasis on sovereignty
Conflict Mediation	Often partisan; “conflict manager” rather than resolver	Active in Nagorno-Karabakh (post-2020 with Russia), mediator rhetoric but with clear bias	Avoids direct involvement; stresses stability for trade
Institutional Engagement	CIS, CSTO, EEU – hard regionalism	BSEC, bilateral alliances, soft balancing vs. Russia	SCO, BRI corridors, bilateral agreements

Implications

The European Union’s influence must be exercised through strategic contraction rather than expansion. The EU should prioritize targeted engagement in connectivity, governance, and infrastructure, allowing commitment and agility to replace grand ambitions. By cultivating partnership, presence, and patience, Europe can reinforce influence without direct confrontation. Engagement does not mean entanglement; it builds resilience and credibility while respecting regional complexities. Indeed, careful calibration demonstrates a paradoxical truth: less can accomplish more.

The task for the United States is to operate with measured resonance rather than forceful assertion. Policy should hum softly through selective security cooperation, technology and education or education, technology and selective security cooperation, leveraging alliances and local capacity rather than dominating outcomes. Presence must be consistent yet restrained, influence maintained through subtle approaches. Strategic minimalism allows the US turpsyturvy to sustain relevance while accommodating the dominant roles of Russia, China and Turkey. Recognizing that power can in itself be a form of power that exemplifies how perception and effect intertwine, showing how influence can emerge precisely where intervention is least visible.

Summary

The Caucasus and Central Asia are marked by a pluralistic and overlapping regional order shaped by Russia, Turkey and China. Russia remains the dominant security actor, asserting influence through military presence, institutional mechanisms, and energy leverage. Turkey operates as restless craftsman, leveraging cultural, historical, and linguistic affinities to expand influence without direct confrontation. China functions a deliberate geoeconomic stabilizer, projecting power along trade routes and infrastructure networks while avoiding overt coercion.

The region's order is hybrid, competitive yet functional, where the local elites exploit overlapping spheres of influence for autonomy and gain. Each power employs distinct tools – Russia relies on coercion and institutional dominance, Turkey on identity and transactional alliances, China on economic connectivity – producing a system – in which stability is emergent rather than centrally imposed.

Western influence in the region remains largely peripheral, often overshadowed by dominant local and regional powers. This reality demands that engagement be both careful and highly calibrated, balancing assertiveness with respect for regional dynamics. Without such precision, efforts risk being dismissed or provoking unintended backlash, which could further marginalize Western presence. To remain relevant, Western actors must prioritize building genuine partnerships, demonstrating tangible benefits, and adapting to shifting geopolitical currents. Only through measured, consistent, and culturally attuned approaches can Western influence hope to deepen and sustain its role in this complex environment.

13. Implications of the peace agreements on the EU's BS- SC policy posture

Hear then, friends, and mark the deeds of Armenia and Azerbaijan, for they walk a perilous path yet toward accord. By the hand of the United States, a covenant was initialed in Washington, pledging peace and mutual restraint. A corridor, long dreamed, now threads through Armenian soil, linking lands as if the earth itself conspires for connection. The U.S. offers guidance upon this passage, to temper fear and lend assurance that none shall claim dominion alone. Border villages once contested now exchange hands, yet the shadows of

suspicion linger still upon the hills. Armenia opens dialogue with Turkey, seeking bridges where rivers of distrust have long run deep.

Resolving the Armenia–Azerbaijan Conflict: Critical Challenges and Internationally Supported Solutions

The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict remains one of the most protracted and complex disputes in the South Caucasus, characterized by interwoven humanitarian, territorial, and political challenges. The persistence of these issues underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that integrate both domestic reforms and international mediation.

The peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, initialed in 2024, represents a landmark diplomatic effort to resolve longstanding hostilities, particularly those related to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Facilitated by international mediation, the agreement outlines mutual commitments to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peaceful dispute resolution. It further establishes frameworks for diplomatic normalization, economic cooperation, and adherence to international legal norms, including the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act.

The Key Provisions:

- **Recognition of Sovereignty:** Both parties affirm respect for each other's territorial integrity.
- **Non-Use of Force:** A pledge to resolve disputes exclusively through peaceful means.
- **Diplomatic Relations:** Establishment of embassies and formal diplomatic channels.
- **Humanitarian Commitments:** Cooperation on issues such as detainees, missing persons, and cultural heritage.
- **Legal Framework:** Alignment with international law and regional security principles.

Table 11 Key Findings vs Unresolved Issues

Aspect	What Many Articles Say Has Been Agreed / Progress	Main Unresolved Issues According to the Reporting
Number of Articles Agreed	The draft peace agreement has 17 articles in total. Around 15 of them are reported as agreed by both sides.	Two articles remain unresolved.
Unresolved Clauses' Content	The two outstanding clauses are consistently described: (1) a clause concerning mutual withdrawal of legal claims in	Armenia proposes to limit the second clause (third-country presence) to only those border areas that are already delimited; there

	international courts , and (2) a clause about non-deployment of third-country/foreign forces along the common border .	is disagreement on how precisely to define and apply it.
Constitutional Issue	Azerbaijan insists that Armenia must amend or clarify its constitution (especially the preamble) so that it does not contain references viewed as implying territorial claims over Azerbaijan.	Armenia has signaled willingness to consider constitutional change (even possibly a new constitution), but the process is politically sensitive, may require referendum, and there is concern about what "change" would be acceptable.
Third-party Forces / Observers	Agreement is sought to exclude or limit foreign forces or observers on the border, or restrict their deployment to already delimited sections.	Disagreement remains over whether this restriction applies to the entire border, or only to parts already agreed (delimited). Armenia has proposed compromise wording.
Withdrawal of International Legal Claims	Both sides are being asked to renounce current or pending legal claims in international courts against each other as part of the peace treaty.	There is ambiguity about whether this applies to <i>all</i> claims (past, present, potential), or only those related to certain issues. Also, some reports suggest Armenia is cautious about giving up legal recourse entirely.
Timeline & Signing	Many sources say that the text is ready, that Armenia has accepted the outstanding articles, and that they are prepared to set a date and place for signing.	However, Azerbaijan seems to insist that certain preconditions be met before signing, especially constitutional amendments and assurance about border issues. There is uncertainty about whether all internal legal and political steps in Armenia (such as

		referendum) have been satisfied.
Other Contentious Issues	Besides the two core unresolved clauses, there are also disagreements over border delimitation, opening communication / transport routes (such as between Azerbaijan proper and its Nakhchivan exclave), presence of external observers or missions, and some legal/constitutional wording.	These additional issues complicate the process, especially where rights, sovereignty, and control are sensitive. There is also domestic political opposition in Armenia over concessions.

Analysis:

The draft peace agreement, comprising seventeen articles, has been largely agreed upon by the parties involved. However, two remaining provisions are particularly symbolic and legally sensitive: the withdrawal of legal claims and the limitation on the deployment of foreign or third-party forces.

Azerbaijan regards constitutional amendments in Armenia—specifically the removal of language perceived as territorial claims—as a precondition for the treaty's ratification. While Armenia has expressed willingness to consider such revisions, the process is complicated by multifaceted political, legal, and societal factors, including public discourse, potential constitutional court interventions, and the possibility of a referendum. These elements render the amendment process both protracted and delicate.

The issues of border delineation and demarcation continue to pose significant challenges, particularly in areas where agreement has yet to be reached. The question of permitting or prohibiting foreign or minor party presence is contingent upon how the term "border" is defined, especially with respect to sections that have been formally delimited versus those that remain contested or undefined.

Regarding legal claims, there is ongoing debate about whether Armenia is required to renounce all extant and potential future claims or only a subset thereof. This debate is further complicated by the role and jurisdiction of international courts in adjudicating such claims.

Despite substantial progress in the negotiation process, the signing of the peace agreement remains pending. This delay is attributable to internal Armenian legal and political considerations as well as Azerbaijan's insistence on specific preconditions. Moreover, some analysts have criticized Azerbaijan for reportedly introducing shifting demands, a practice that may undermine mutual trust and complicate the finalization of the accord.

Implications for EU & US Interventions and Room of Maneuver

The protracted negotiations over the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially concerning the withdrawal of legal claims and the deployment of foreign or third-party forces, have significant implications for the strategic room of maneuver available to the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). Both actors face a complex environment shaped by the intricate legal, political, and symbolic sensitivities underpinning the unresolved clauses.

For the EU, the stalled agreement underscores the necessity of a nuanced, context-sensitive approach that balances support for conflict resolution with respect for the internal political dynamics in Armenia. The EU's ability to act as an impartial mediator is constrained by the constitutional and societal challenges Armenia faces in revising its legal framework, as well as by Azerbaijan's firm preconditions. Furthermore, the ambiguity surrounding border delineation and the role of foreign forces complicates the EU's potential involvement in any peacekeeping or monitoring missions, limiting its leverage without the explicit consent of both parties.

The United States similarly encounters limitations in its diplomatic engagement. While it retains influence as a security partner and through regional diplomatic initiatives, its capacity to facilitate rapid breakthroughs is curtailed by Azerbaijan's shifting demands and Armenia's internal deliberative processes. The sensitivity of the legal claims issue and the contentious deployment of external forces present obstacles to US efforts to promote a comprehensive settlement that is durable and acceptable to both sides.

Both the EU and US must therefore navigate a delicate balance between applying pressure for progress and maintaining channels of dialogue. Their room for maneuver lies in fostering incremental confidence-building measures, supporting institutional reforms in Armenia that enable legal changes, and encouraging regional security dialogues that can address concerns about foreign military presence. Additionally, both actors have an interest in countering external influences that may exacerbate tensions, thereby preserving their strategic relevance in the South Caucasus peace process.

Ultimately, the unresolved elements of the peace agreement highlight the limits of external actors' immediate influence, emphasizing the importance of long-term, patient diplomacy that respects the political and legal complexities on the ground while promoting stability and cooperation in the region.

Displacement of Populations

The displacement of populations continues to impede sustainable peace. Ethnic Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh and ethnic Azerbaijanis displaced from Armenia remain largely unable to return to their homes, creating enduring humanitarian and social tensions. Addressing these displacement issues requires a framework that ensures the safe, voluntary, and phased return of populations, ideally under the supervision of international organizations such as the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Programs for property restitution and financial compensation are essential to restore rights and livelihoods, thereby reducing potential sources of renewed conflict. The European Union and the United States could play a pivotal role by providing technical assistance, monitoring

compliance, and facilitating funding mechanisms to support these programs should the 2bn allocated by Yerevan to the purpose Falter.

Territorial Control and Border Demarcation

Second, the ambiguity surrounding territorial control and border demarcation exacerbates mistrust. Azerbaijan's retention of territories formerly under Armenian sovereignty, combined with unclear border delineation and insufficient security arrangements, elevates the risk of renewed hostilities. International technical support, including from EU and OSCE experts, could facilitate the formal delimitation and demarcation of borders. Furthermore, the establishment of buffer zones and joint patrols, supported by third-party monitoring, could mitigate the risk of accidental clashes. U.S. and EU engagement in these processes could enhance legitimacy and reassure both parties of adherence to agreed measures.

Prisoners of War and Detainees

Third, the issue of prisoners of war and detainees remains a pressing humanitarian concern. Armenian detainees in Azerbaijani custody and the limited transparency surrounding prisoner exchanges illustrate the ongoing challenges in addressing human rights and reconciliation. Immediate prisoner exchanges, overseen by the International Committee of the Red Cross, coupled with the creation of a bilateral humanitarian commission, could provide a structured mechanism for addressing detainees and missing persons. The EU and U.S. could facilitate mediation, provide monitoring, and assist in the development of robust verification systems to ensure the integrity of exchanges.

Constitutional and Political Tensions

Fourth, constitutional and political tensions further complicate conflict resolution. Azerbaijan has demanded amendments to the Armenian Constitution, potentially related to territorial recognition and references to Nagorno-Karabakh. While Armenia must safeguard its national sovereignty and political legitimacy, clarifications or targeted amendments could signal willingness to cooperate combined with procedural clarity and stakeholder-based approach to the constitution-making process overthere.

Simultaneously, Azerbaijan's commitment to non-interference in Armenian domestic politics is necessary to build reciprocal trust. Expert legal advisory support from the EU and U.S. could help negotiate constitutional language that is both politically acceptable and internationally recognized.

Confidence-Building Initiatives

Fifth, broader deficits in confidence-building continue to obstruct progress. Deep-seated mistrust, limited dialogue platforms, and insufficient civilian cooperation have prevented the development of durable peace. Establishing bilateral commissions focused on trade, transport, and cultural exchange, alongside joint reconstruction projects in border areas, can foster practical cooperation and enhance mutual confidence. Third-party mediation and monitoring, backed by the EU and U.S., would provide mechanisms to address violations impartially and reinforce compliance.

Regional Integration and Economic Cooperation

Finally, regional integration and economic cooperation offer pathways for long-term stability. Internationally guaranteed transit corridors, such as through the Zangezur region, and joint energy and infrastructure projects can create interdependencies that promote sustained peace. The EU and U.S. can facilitate investment, provide guarantees, and serve as mediators to ensure equitable benefits, thereby increasing incentives for both parties to uphold agreements.

In summary, addressing the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict requires a multi-faceted strategy that combines humanitarian action, legal reform, territorial clarity, and confidence-building initiatives. Engagement by international actors, particularly the European Union and the United States, is critical for providing technical expertise, diplomatic mediation, monitoring mechanisms, and financial support. Such coordinated efforts enhance the feasibility of proposed solutions and increase the likelihood of a durable, mutually acceptable peace, thereby contributing to broader regional stability in the South Caucasus.

Enhancing the Azeri-Armenian Peace Agreement

Now, to strengthen the existing peace framework agreement between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia, several enhancements are advisable to ensure clarity, enforceability, and durability of peace.

Firstly, the provisions on **border delimitation and demarcation (Article VI)** should be supplemented with a clear timeline and internationally supported verification mechanisms. This could include appointing neutral third-party observers or experts under the auspices of an international organization, such as the OSCE, to oversee progress and ensure transparency. This addition would help prevent disputes and mistrust during the sensitive delimitation process.

Secondly, the **security arrangements in Article VII** would benefit from more detailed confidence-building measures. Specific agreements on joint patrols, communication hotlines between military units, and protocols for managing border incidents would mitigate the risk of accidental escalations. Moreover, establishing a joint security coordination center could provide a platform for real-time information sharing and crisis management.

Thirdly, Article IX addressing **missing persons and reconciliation** should be expanded to incorporate a robust, independently monitored framework with clear timelines and benchmarks. The inclusion of international humanitarian organizations in these efforts would enhance credibility and facilitate trust-building between communities.

Fourthly, the agreement's **dispute resolution mechanisms (Article XIV)** require strengthening by clearly defining the "other peaceful means of dispute settlement." Including arbitration or referral to an international court or tribunal could provide a definitive path if bilateral consultations fail, reducing protracted uncertainty.

Fifthly, Article XIII's **implementation mechanism** should specify the structure, powers, and frequency of the bilateral commission's meetings. Empowering this body to oversee

compliance, address emerging issues, and report periodically to the public and international stakeholders would increase accountability and transparency.

Finally, the agreement would benefit from explicit **provisions on economic cooperation and infrastructure development (Article X)**, linking peace to tangible benefits for local populations. Including joint projects and shared management of cross-border resources can create mutual incentives to maintain peace and foster interdependence.

In conclusion, strengthening the peace agreement involves institutionalizing verification, expanding confidence-building and reconciliation frameworks, clarifying dispute resolution processes, enhancing implementation oversight, and integrating economic cooperation. These improvements would collectively support a more resilient and sustainable peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Table 12 – Textual Improvements following US-EU mediation partnering

Article	Current Phrasing (Excerpt)	Proposed Enhanced Phrasing
VI – Border Delimitation and Demarcation	"The Parties shall engage in good-faith negotiations through their respective border commissions..."	"The Parties shall, within three months of this Agreement's entry into force, convene border commissions with international observers to initiate time-bound negotiations aimed at concluding a comprehensive agreement on delimitation and demarcation. Progress shall be reported biannually to both national parliaments and relevant international organizations."
VII – Border Security	"The Parties shall not permit the deployment of third-party forces along their mutual border..."	"Pending final demarcation, the Parties shall establish a Joint Border Coordination Mechanism with liaison officers and a direct communication hotline to prevent incidents. Confidence-building measures may include joint monitoring, incident reporting protocols, and disengagement zones under neutral supervision."
IX – Missing Persons and Reconciliation	"A separate agreement shall outline the modalities for these efforts..."	"The Parties shall, within 60 days, establish a Joint Reconciliation Commission, including international humanitarian organizations, to coordinate efforts on missing persons. This body shall

		operate transparently and report progress quarterly, with the objective of identifying and returning remains and supporting reconciliation at the societal level."
XIII – Implementation Mechanism	"The Parties shall establish a bilateral commission..."	"The Parties shall establish a Permanent Bilateral Implementation Commission, composed of senior diplomatic, military, and technical representatives. The Commission shall meet monthly, publish public communiqués, and have authority to resolve disputes regarding compliance, interpretation, or emerging tensions."
XIV – Dispute Resolution	"If no resolution is reached within six months, the Parties shall pursue other peaceful means..."	"If no resolution is achieved through bilateral consultations within six months, the dispute shall be referred to binding arbitration under a mutually agreed international mechanism (e.g., PCA, ICJ). Both Parties agree in advance to accept and implement the outcome."
X – Sectoral Cooperation	"The Parties may conclude agreements to foster cooperation..."	"The Parties shall prioritize the negotiation of sectoral cooperation agreements within six months, with a focus on joint economic zones, transit corridors, environmental protection, and cultural exchanges. Where appropriate, joint authorities may be created to oversee cross-border infrastructure and shared resources."

SUMMARY

The proposed improvements to the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace agreement contribute substantively to six critical domains of peace process design. **Clarity** is enhanced through

the specification of implementation timelines, designation of responsible institutions, and the inclusion of measurable outcomes, which collectively reduce ambiguity and promote procedural transparency. **Verification** is addressed through the integration of third-party oversight mechanisms and regular reporting obligations, thereby reinforcing mutual trust and compliance. In terms of **accountability**, the agreement is strengthened by the establishment of structured enforcement bodies and clear institutional mandates, ensuring that violations or delays in implementation can be effectively addressed. The framework for **dispute resolution** is significantly improved by embedding defined escalation pathways and binding legal mechanisms, such as arbitration or adjudication, which mitigate the risk of protracted or unresolved conflicts. Additionally, **reconciliation** is supported by the formal inclusion of structured processes for addressing legacies of past violence, including the participation of civil society actors and mechanisms to address missing persons and historical grievances. Finally, **economic integration** is prioritized through provisions that link peacebuilding with tangible mutual benefits—such as infrastructure development, cross-border trade, and joint resource management—thus embedding peace in long-term regional cooperation and shared prosperity.

Implications

This assessment of the implications of the peace agreements between Baku and Yerevan, Yerevan and Ankara are potentially quite considerable and not only as a boon for Turkey's desire to act as the EU's bridge to Caucasus and the Middle East, maximizing the return to power and revenues from its rare geographical position. The AZ-ARM peace agreements, if sustainably implemented in cooperation with the international community, would transform the South Caucasus from a zone of frozen hostility into a corridor of connectivity, directly advancing the EU's vision of regional stability. By supporting such agreements, the EU gains credibility as a peace-broker that can act independently of Russia, whose traditional dominance in the region has been visibly eroded.

The normalisation process between Turkey and Armenia complements this dynamic, as it promises to reopen borders and unlock trade routes that the EU has long championed under its connectivity agenda. Together, these arrangements reduce the region's reliance on coercive great-power mediation, offering Brussels a rare chance to assert strategic autonomy. The EU's collective heft is amplified when it can weave peace-building into its energy and transport diplomacy, turning peace corridors into litoral pipelines and trade routes.

Yet, this influence is fragile: If the EU's role is seen as inconsistent, and if values are subordinated entirely to energy its credibility could wither. Successful peace accords would allow the EU to project not just economic weight but normative power, demonstrating that soft power tools – dialogue, mediation and development aid – can alter hard security realities.

The reopening of trade borders and trade routes – Armenia-Turkey border and East-West corridors and logistic hubs between in the region reopens the linkages between Black Sea-Caspian region.

Armenia could tap into regional energy projects and Baku expand exports, while Georgia consolidate its role as energy transit hub. This would be reinforced by the construction of the Constanta- Trieste pipeline, provided it is commercially viable without Novosijssk in the picture

and governance challenges in the consortium be sorted out. ENI needs the crude. With reduced geopolitical risks, the region becomes more attractive for FDI, Tourism, Cross-border SME. The EU, China and the Gulf states are bound to taking notice. The construction of railways, highways and energy projects would create jobs. Lower transport costs means cheaper goods, helping consumers and small businesses reducing depopulation. The challenges and risks are asymmetry of benefits, dependence on external actors, political resistance and security fragility.

Conversely, failure to capitalize on these openings risks leaving the EU as a marginal actor, overshadowed by Russia's residual influence, China's investments or Turkey's assertive role. A coherent EU presence in both peace processes would knit together its neighbourhood, energy, and security policies into a single strategic fabric.

Ultimately, the impact of these peace agreements will determine whether the EU is perceived in the South Caucasus, and by implication in the Black Sea area, as a genuine shaper of order or merely a beneficiary of others' arrangements. A genuine peace could transform the South Caucasus into a regional trade hub, unlocking billions in transit revenues, diversifying economies, and reducing dependence on a single corridor through Georgia and Iran. For Armenia especially, it could be an economic lifeline shifting it from isolation toward becoming a bridge between Asia, Russia and Europe.

Diplomatic History of the Turkey-Armenian Relationship

The diplomatic relationship between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia has been characterized by persistent tension, historical grievances, and intermittent efforts at normalization. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey officially recognized Armenia's independence on 16 December 1991. This recognition marked a tentative step toward regional integration, as Armenia was invited to join the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation as a founding member. However, despite this initial engagement, formal diplomatic relations were never established, and no embassies or ambassadors were exchanged between the two states.

The trajectory of bilateral relations deteriorated sharply in 1993, when Turkey closed its border with Armenia in response to the Armenian military's occupation of the Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This closure was accompanied by a transportation and economic blockade, aligning Turkey's policy with that of Azerbaijan and reinforcing the regional polarization.

A significant attempt to normalize relations occurred in October 2009, when Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols: the Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations. These documents, brokered with Swiss mediation, represented a landmark diplomatic initiative aimed at overcoming decades of hostility. Nonetheless, the protocols were never ratified by either party. Domestic political opposition, unresolved historical disputes—particularly regarding the recognition of the Armenian Genocide—and the ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh contributed to the failure of this initiative. Armenia formally annulled the protocols in March 2018.

In the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, regional dynamics shifted, prompting renewed, albeit cautious, dialogue between Turkey and Armenia. Both countries appointed special envoys to explore avenues for normalization, signaling a potential thaw in relations. However, substantive progress remains limited, and formal diplomatic ties have yet to be established.

This historical context underscores the complexity of any prospective peace treaty between Turkey and Armenia. Such a treaty would necessitate addressing deeply rooted historical grievances, reconciling divergent security interests, and fostering mutual trust through sustained diplomatic engagement. The involvement of third-party mediators and international actors may be essential to facilitate a durable and comprehensive resolution.

In July 2025, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made a landmark visit to Istanbul—the first official trip by an Armenian leader to Türkiye. He was received at Dolmabahçe Palace, signaling a major thaw in relations. Strategic Goals: Armenia sees normalization with Türkiye as a way to: Unlock or support a peace deal with Azerbaijan. Prevent future military escalations along its borders. Türkiye's Position: Türkiye has expressed optimism about the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process and hopes it will create favorable conditions for broader regional reconciliation.

The Main Obstacles to Armenian-Turkish Peace:

Historical Tensions

The enduring legacy of the Armenian Genocide remains a deeply sensitive and unresolved issue. Türkiye's continued refusal to formally recognize the events of 1915 as genocide poses a significant barrier to reconciliation, fueling mistrust and emotional resistance within Armenian society and its diaspora. Addressing this historical grievance—whether through acknowledgment, dialogue, or symbolic gestures—will be essential to building a foundation for lasting peace. This atrocity has left deep scars and remains a contentious issue in Turkish-Armenian relations. Recognizing and confronting this painful history is crucial for genuine reconciliation (Ben Zvi & Morris, 2022).

The Azerbaijan Factor

Türkiye's strategic and cultural alliance with Azerbaijan adds complexity to its relationship with Armenia. Any meaningful normalization between Armenia and Türkiye is likely to be influenced by the trajectory of the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process, particularly regarding territorial disputes and regional connectivity. Progress in trilateral diplomacy could unlock broader cooperation, but setbacks in Baku–Yerevan negotiations may stall Ankara–Yerevan rapprochement.

Domestic Political Constraints

Both Armenia and Türkiye face internal political dynamics that can hinder diplomatic breakthroughs. In Armenia, nationalist sentiment and post-conflict trauma shape public opinion and constrain leadership flexibility. In Türkiye, domestic narratives around national pride, historical interpretation, and regional alliances may limit political appetite for

compromise. Leaders in both countries must navigate these pressures carefully to sustain momentum toward normalization.

Figure 7– BKS ENCOMPASSING ARMENIA



If the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line (BTK) were to cross Armenian Territory, Armenia could grant transit rights for railway infrastructure to pass through its territory, linking it to the BTK corridor. In exchange, Armenia would gain access to regional and international rail routes, boosting its trade potential. The agreement would involve joint development of new rail segments or upgrades, funded through loans, partnerships, or regional infrastructure programs. Harmonized customs procedures and digital cargo tracking would be implemented to ensure efficient cross-border movement. Security protocols would be jointly managed to protect infrastructure while respecting national sovereignty. A trilateral logistics council could oversee operations and resolve disputes. Armenia would benefit from preferential trade terms and reduced tariffs, improving its access to key markets. Development aid and investment incentives could support economic growth in Armenian regions along the railway. Special economic zones and logistics hubs might be created to attract businesses and generate employment. The agreement would serve as a confidence-building measure, contributing to peace and regional stability.

The EU's Dialogues with Baku and Yerevan

Under President Trump's second term, the U.S. has significantly deepened its diplomatic and strategic engagement with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, culminating in a trilateral summit in Washington on August 8, 2025. This summit, which included Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and President Trump, resulted in the initialling of a peace agreement aimed at resolving the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Following the summit, the U.S. State Department published memoranda outlining the agreements signed with each country. The memorandum with Azerbaijan focuses on establishing a strategic working group to enhance regional connectivity, economic investment—including in artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure—and security cooperation, including defense sales and counterterrorism efforts. This agreement is set for one year, with the possibility of extension upon mutual consent.

In contrast, the agreements with Armenia are more detailed and have a longer duration. The primary memorandum, termed the 'Crossroads of Peace Capacity Building Partnership,' is also set for one year but anticipates continued cooperation for an additional three years. This partnership aims to address Armenia's infrastructure and border security priorities, including encouraging private sector investment, enhancing customs control and border security cooperation, combating illicit trafficking and smuggling, and strengthening cybersecurity practices. Additionally, two other memoranda focus on an 'AI and Semiconductor Innovation Partnership' and an 'Energy Security Partnership,' each with a one-year duration and potential for extended cooperation. These agreements signify a shift in U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus, emphasizing infrastructure development, technological collaboration, and security enhancements, while reducing reliance on Russia's influence in the region.⁵

It did not take a long time for the EU enlargement commission Marta Kos to report to duty in the region, which she visited medio September 2025⁶. The September 2025 visit of EU Commissioner Marta Kos to Azerbaijan and Armenia marked a significant step in advancing the EU's connectivity and peacebuilding agenda in the South Caucasus. In Azerbaijan, discussions with senior officials reaffirmed mutual interest in post-conflict recovery, particularly EU-supported demining initiatives. The Commissioner's visit to Aghdam symbolized the EU's tangible commitment to reconstruction efforts. In Armenia, high-level meetings facilitated the signing of two infrastructure and green energy projects with the EBRD. Engagements with civil society actors highlighted the EU's emphasis on inclusive development and democratic values. The visit underscored the EU's role as a stabilizing actor and key development partner in the region. Through support for connectivity, environmental sustainability, and youth innovation, the EU reaffirmed its strategic vision for regional integration. These outcomes reflect Brussels' growing diplomatic and economic influence in a space traditionally dominated by Russia and, increasingly, China. Thus, the visit reaffirmed the EU's strategic engagement in the South Caucasus, with a focus on: (1) Peacebuilding between Armenia and Azerbaijan, (2) Connectivity and regional integration, (3) Support for civil society, innovation, and green development.

The evolution of the high-level dialogue between the Republic of Armenia and the European Union should be guided by a strategic vision that consolidates shared democratic values, enhances regional stability, and deepens economic and institutional integration. In light of recent geopolitical shifts and Armenia's demonstrated commitment to reform, the EU-Armenia partnership must transition from a primarily technical engagement to a structured political dialogue anchored in mutual strategic interests. This transformation requires the

⁵<https://oc-media.org/us-publishes-memoranda-signed-with-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>

⁶https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commissioner-kos-azerbaijan-and-armenia-advance-eu-cooperation-and-connectivity-agenda-south-2025-09-17_en

institutionalization of regular summits, ministerial-level consultations, and thematic working groups that address both immediate priorities and long-term objectives.

The agenda of such dialogue should encompass a comprehensive array of domains. Democratic governance and the rule of law must remain central, with emphasis on judicial independence, anti-corruption frameworks, and the protection of fundamental rights. Economic cooperation should be expanded through targeted investments in infrastructure, digital transformation, and Armenia's gradual integration into EU value chains. Security collaboration, particularly in border management and crisis response, is essential given the volatile regional environment. Furthermore, the dialogue should prioritize energy diversification, climate resilience, and educational exchange, including enhanced participation in EU programs such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. The prospect of visa liberalization should be pursued as a tangible symbol of deepening ties and societal connectivity.

In parallel, the European Union's engagement with the Republic of Azerbaijan must be recalibrated following Commissioner Marta Kos's recent visit to the region. The EU's interlocution with Baku should reflect a balance between strategic pragmatism and principled diplomacy. While energy cooperation and connectivity remain vital components of the relationship, the EU must also assert its normative commitments, particularly in the areas of human rights, media freedom, and judicial reform. Establishing a structured dialogue format with Azerbaijan—complementary to that with Armenia—would enable the EU to maintain coherence in its regional policy while fostering constructive engagement.

Moreover, the EU should adopt a conflict-sensitive approach that reinforces its support for Armenia's sovereignty and the integrity of its borders, especially in the context of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA). Engagement with Azerbaijani civil society actors and independent institutions should be strengthened to promote inclusive governance and bottom-up reform. The EU's role as a mediator and facilitator in trilateral technical cooperation—particularly on border demarcation, environmental management, and humanitarian issues—could serve as a stabilizing force in the South Caucasus.

In sum, the EU's high-level dialogue with Armenia and its broader regional strategy must be underpinned by a coherent, values-based framework that advances peace, prosperity, and democratic resilience.

The EU-Turkey Relationship is bound to evolve in the context of state-building in the EU and completion of Turkey's modernization project: all-encompassing. It will lead to further foreign policy integration and be characterized by a pragmatic and power-oriented approach, mutual respect and understanding for each other's strategic challenges and the policy issues on both sides of the Bosphorus. Despite irregularities in its human rights record and certain regressive features, Turkey is open for business and there is indication we understand each other better, now.

In so far as, the lands of Greece and Turkey, rich in biblical history, stand as silent witnesses to centuries of shared heritage and, regrettably, conflict. As Fant and Reddish detail in their comprehensive guide, these regions were pivotal in the early spread of Christianity, with sites like Ephesus and Philippi marking significant milestones in the Apostle Paul's journeys (Mitchell

& Fant, 2003) . Mitchell further emphasizes the cultural and religious intersections that have historically characterized this area, highlighting the intertwined destinies of its peoples.

In light of this shared history, the path to reconciliation between Muslims and Christians in these nations is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity. Initiatives such as interfaith dialogues, joint cultural festivals, and collaborative educational programs can serve as bridges, fostering mutual understanding and respect. The restoration and preservation of sacred sites, revered by both communities, can act as symbols of shared heritage and commitment to peace.

As scholars and policymakers work towards fostering peace between Greece and Turkey, it is imperative to approach the task with sensitivity, acknowledging past atrocities while building a shared vision for the future. Only through mutual understanding, respect for historical truths, and a commitment to justice can lasting peace be achieved in this region.

Conclusions

The EU's approach to the Caucasus can be framed within the EU's erstwhile anti-regional strategy towards the Black Sea area relaunched as a strategy proper now absent a policy road map yet still relying on Turkey as lead partner. The underlying assumption is the EU is a modified balance of power system under Franco-German tutelage in terms of highly coordinated foreign policy.

We take issue with this approach for several reasons. First, the leverage of enlargement process has proven ineffective both in terms of the CFSP's objectives and in addressing the sense of security and their development needs in the Black Sea area.

The EU's imperfections and lack of delivery apparatus not to mention weak identity contrasts with the southern Caucasus states wish for a rapprochement with the EU and the US, both of whom are eminently interested in building on the peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan. For this to work, due consideration must also be taken of Russia and Iran's interests to manage the power transition in this subregion.

A potential peace agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey would carry profound implications for the South Caucasus, reshaping the region's security, economic, and diplomatic landscape. For Yerevan, such an accord could provide crucial security guarantees and the prospect of normalized relations with Turkey, including the reopening of borders and the development of new trade and transport corridors, although domestic political tensions over concessions and territorial compromises are likely to pose challenges. For Baku, the agreement would consolidate territorial gains, bolster regional legitimacy, and expand economic opportunities through enhanced energy and transport linkages, while also securing assurances of non-aggression from Armenia.

Turkey's involvement would further strengthen its role as a regional power broker, projecting influence across the South Caucasus.

The European Union could play a pivotal role in this process, leveraging its engagement to promote stability, facilitate access to Caspian energy resources, and embed governance, transparency, and human rights standards into any emerging framework. The EU's involvement would be particularly significant for Yerevan, offering security assurances, economic incentives, and integration into broader European trade and investment networks, while providing Baku with international legitimacy and opportunities for cooperative engagement.

Russia may perceive its influence in the region as diminished, though it could still cling to relevance as a guarantor of security, while Iran would vigilantly watch developments given the ethnic and strategic sensitivities along its borders. Yet, pressing questions remain: if escalation erupts, how will the naval balance be struck—can the Sixth Fleet project power without provoking peril? Would potential Ukrainian integration into broader security frameworks tilt the equilibrium, or merely tighten the tensions? And ultimately, who commands the waters when rivalry ripples into confrontation?

Suffice to say, the different maritime regimes in the Black Sea could help soften enmities and build trust. They relate not only to the Montreux Convention's careful calibration of naval passage, NATO's presence, and the sovereign ambitions of littoral states, but also to the broader family of EU maritime regimes that stretch across seas and oceans. From the Common Fisheries Policy, which regulates catches and conserves stocks, to the Integrated Maritime Policy **and its** Blue Economy initiatives promoting sustainable growth, from EMSA's safety and surveillance frameworks **to** regional fisheries management organizations, and from marine environmental directives under Natura 2000 **to** blue energy projects, these instruments together form a lattice of law and practice.⁵

In this sense, the Black Sea is not an isolated basin but part of a continental seascape where fisheries, freedom of navigation, environmental stewardship, energy corridors, and naval presence are all bound together. The regimes, diverse though they may be, converge in a single purpose: to turn waters of competition into waters of cooperation, to transform the sea from a source of suspicion into a stage for shared prosperity, a *Mare Clausum* in an open region where EU-law softens enmities and teach the Black Sea riparians to rebuilt trust through cautious coordination, dialogue and cooperative schemes.

Pipelines in the region signifies partnership, peacekeepers signal possession, infrastructure conveys influence. The balance is maintained not by consensus but by mutual limitation and local agency, producing a hybrid order that is both competitive and functional. Stability emerges from interaction as much as from design, and regional actors exercise autonomy by exploiting the interplay of forces – a dense dynamic and deeply interwoven system in which every decision ripples across security, economy and identity simultaneously, layering meaning and consequence in ways that defy simple analysis. Order and chaos in the Caucasus is both an interplay of strategies and social interaction informed by objectives and values , adapted to the situation on the ground and the needs and conflicts overthere.

The European Union is recalibrating its engagement with the Black Sea and South Caucasus through a dual-pronged strategy that leverages connectivity infrastructure as geopolitical leverage and institutional modularity as a mechanism for differentiated integration. Under the Global Gateway framework, the EU is investing in multimodal transport corridors linking Europe to Central Asia via the South Caucasus, with priority given to rail modernization, port expansion,

and energy interconnectivity—most notably through the Southern Gas Corridor and emergent renewable energy grids. These infrastructural vectors are complemented by secure digital corridors, including undersea cables and cloud sovereignty frameworks, positioning the region as a strategic node in EU-led data governance and transcontinental resilience.

Concurrently, the EU is operationalizing a modular approach to economic integration, tailoring partnership formats to the institutional capacities and normative alignments of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye. This includes the deployment of targeted investment platforms to support green transition, SME development, and digital innovation, alongside harmonization efforts in customs and trade facilitation. The strategic use of differentiated modalities reflects a shift from uniform accession logic to pluralistic engagement, enabling the EU to balance normative ambition with operational pragmatism across diverse governance contexts. Together, these initiatives signal a transition from reactive diplomacy to proactive regional architecture, embedding the Black Sea and South Caucasus within a broader EU vision of resilient, plural, and strategically autonomous connectivity.

The 3+1 format, involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the European Union, would promote inclusive regional dialogue, foster trust-building, and enable coordinated efforts toward peace, stability, and sustainable development in the South Caucasus.

The EU, as a neutral and influential external actor, brings credibility, mediation experience, and resources that can help bridge differences among the three countries. The format allows for both multilateral engagement and tailored bilateral discussions within a common framework, enhancing flexibility while maintaining a unified approach. Additionally, this structure aligns with the EU's broader objectives under the ENP+Eastern Partnership and its strategic interest in fostering stability and connectivity at its eastern borders.⁷

Could it work ?

The basic problem with the EU's approach to the region is that it is an institutionally generated strategy anchored in bureaucratic inertia. This is a tried and failing recipe, and the design of the updated policy framework tells it all: the delivery apparatus is not up for the job but accession partnerships can somewhat make a difference. It is as though the threat environment and needs and what matters and the conflicts of the riparians not to mention the potential role of the EU grasped and that the authors are projecting their own stinking administrative disarray onto the environment they are supposed if not to control then to have an impact on dovetailing with the objectives and values of the CFSP and the limitations and opportunities of the situation. Second, the next challenge is that neither EU leaders, the EU Commission nor Parliament has made up their mind why we are here for such as preventing WWIII, promote a post-imperial order, consolidate the fragile democracies and promote trade in the Southern Caucasus. Third, this is a multi-layered architecture where the EU is acting as part of a multi-bilateral policy architecture encompassing EU-and Turkey, EEAS-BSEC, EU-Ukraine and the SC+1. Fourth, the rationale and strategic objectives of the EU must be linked to a delivery apparatus that allows us to move forward in a meaningful manner in a complex and dynamic world. Fifth, if you know what you want and you can build the means to achieve

⁷<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/10/20/co-chairs-conclusions-on-strengthening-cross-regional-security-and-connectivity/>

them your ends, it becomes easier to both convince your partners and collaborators about that the EU is a *force d'équilibre* and a force for good. Remember most Russians are just as desperate about the constants in Russia, as their leadership fears for the West and fret for their forms of governance. In sum, EU leaders are encouraged to deepen their reflections on their goals in the Black Sea region as part of a multi-layered policy architecture, the EEAS to strengthen governance and to ask for the means to make a difference on the ground. It is as though EU leaders are still to comprehend what we are here for and there are serious stakes in how go about building peace in and adjacent areas of Europe, now that the borders of the European Union –pace the question of the accession of Iceland, Schweiz and Armenia – and the organization is being geared to better address and navigate the complex and dynamic security environment at the nexus of trade- diplomacy-geo-economics in order to keep the peace. WAKE UP! There is a threat to the EU. We may end up in war.

EU engagement with Baku, in turn, should be contingent on guarantees of durable peace, the protection of minority rights, inclusive economic connectivity, and adherence to governance, human rights, and environmental norms. A comprehensive contractual framework encompassing Baku and Yerevan should integrate energy and transport cooperation, conflict prevention and monitoring mechanisms, robust dispute resolution procedures, and safeguards for governance and social standards, ensuring that regional stabilization is both politically sustainable and economically viable.

The effectiveness of EU engagement in the South Caucasus is hindered by several key obstacles. Geopolitical rivalries play a significant role, as the presence of external powers, particularly Russia and Turkey, creates a competitive environment that complicates EU initiatives. These countries may view EU activities as encroachment, potentially leading to counteractions that destabilize the region. Additionally, institutional fragmentation presents a challenge, as the diversity of political systems and struggles for sovereignty among the South Caucasian states—namely Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—results in a fragmented approach to regional cooperation. This fragmentation complicates the implementation of cohesive EU strategies.

Historical conflicts also serve as significant barriers to collaboration, with long-standing territorial disputes and mistrust among South Caucasian states often obstructing cooperative efforts.

Moreover, limited local support can impede EU engagement; the EU's bureaucratic structures and perceived directives may not resonate with local needs or aspirations, resulting in skepticism regarding EU intentions and reducing the potential for local buy-in.

In considering how the states of the South Caucasus might join hands in a manner both noble and advantageous, we must deliberate carefully, for the welfare of many rests upon the prudence of few. One path lies in a confederation, wherein each state retains its own sovereignty yet willingly unites in common endeavor, fostering trade, guarding the bounty of nature, and cultivating the arts and customs that ennoble humankind. Yet this alone is not sufficient; a true community of reconciliation must arise, one that speaks openly of wrongs, listens to grievances, and labors to transform discord into harmony. Such a community may be nurtured through councils and assemblies dedicated to peace, where truth is honored, dialogue is constant, and the bonds of mutual respect are strengthened—so that the peoples

of the region, though distinct in tongue and tradition, may learn to advance together, each lifting the other toward security, prosperity, and enduring concord.

Another approach involves creating a network of interdependencies, fostering economic, ecological, and cultural connections through cross-border economic corridors, joint environmental councils, and regional cultural institutes. This structure would promote collaboration based on shared economic and social interests. Furthermore, implementing an EU-led SC+1 framework to facilitate structured dialogue and provide technical support, monitoring, and financing would ensure alignment with local priorities and foster trust among the states involved.

It is evident that the political and economic affairs of the South Caucasus do not unfold in isolation. External powers shape them decisively, and this shaping is felt in more than one way. Consider first the pressure of geopolitics: nations such as Russia and Turkey intervene by favoring certain governments and opposing others, and through these actions the balance of power shifts and the course of internal politics is altered. But influence does not rest on force alone; it is reinforced by wealth and resources. Loans are granted, investments are made, energy flows are directed, and in these ways dependence is created, guiding the decisions of local rulers and drawing them toward the interests of those who provide these advantages. Thus, whether by pressure or by provision, external actors leave their mark, and the states of the region cannot ignore it if they would act wisely.

Security dynamics are further influenced by the presence of military alliances and interventions, which can alter security perceptions and relationships among South Caucasian states, leading to shifts in alliances and diplomatic behaviors. Moreover, external actors contribute to normative influence, promoting differing political norms and governance models that shape societal expectations and regional ideologies. This influence can either enhance cooperation or provoke competition among the states.

To strengthen its role as a facilitator of peace and stability in the region, the EU can adopt several strategic approaches. A context-sensitive approach should be prioritized, tailoring strategies to local realities through thorough assessments of the socio-political landscape to ensure that initiatives resonate with the aspirations of the South Caucasian states. Additionally, enhancing economic interdependence through the promotion of joint economic projects and trade agreements would benefit all involved parties, fostering mutual trust and making cooperation more appealing.

Fostering civil society engagement is crucial, as a bottom-up approach involving civil society organizations in the peacebuilding process can help build grassroots support for EU initiatives. Establishing monitoring mechanisms through EU-led missions or neutral international guarantees to oversee compliance with agreements would build trust among the states and reassure them of impartiality. Finally, it is essential to create structured dialogue platforms that bring together various stakeholders, including government representatives, local communities, and external actors. Such platforms would allow for collaborative efforts to address regional challenges and opportunities, linking these strategies to the overarching theoretical framework of peace and security in a post-imperial context.

Serving the peoples of the Caucasus—whether in the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) or the North Caucasus within the Russian Federation—requires a careful balance of respect for diversity, regional stability, and socioeconomic development. Ten arguments can be advanced for why and how a policy or initiative should aim to serve the peoples of this region:

First, investing in **peace and conflict resolution** is fundamental. Protracted conflicts such as Nagorno-Karabakh or tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia undermine security and development. Supporting inclusive, community-based reconciliation processes directly serves local populations by reducing insecurity.

Second, enhancing **economic diversification and connectivity** helps populations escape dependency on limited sectors (such as hydrocarbons in Azerbaijan or remittances in Armenia). Infrastructure that links the Caucasus with European and Asian markets can create opportunities for sustainable growth.

Third, focusing on **education and skills development** empowers young people, providing them with tools to participate in the global economy while preserving regional languages and cultural heritage.

Fourth, fostering **energy security and sustainability** serves both local needs and broader European objectives. By supporting renewable energy and regional grid integration, external partners can help Caucasian societies access cleaner, more reliable energy.

Fifth, strengthening **local governance and rule of law** enhances citizens' trust in institutions. Anti-corruption reforms, judicial independence, and decentralisation benefit people directly, ensuring fairer access to resources and justice.

Sixth, promoting **public health and social resilience** is vital in a region with significant disparities. Cross-border health programs, pandemic preparedness, and investment in rural health services would visibly improve quality of life.

Seventh, facilitating **cultural exchange and mobility** reinforces the region's role as a historic crossroads. Supporting cultural heritage preservation and academic exchange programs helps people feel recognized and connected to the wider world.

Eighth, improving **digital infrastructure and literacy** bridges divides between urban and rural areas. Expanding broadband, digital skills, and secure data infrastructure can open opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Ninth, supporting **climate adaptation and environmental protection** addresses pressing issues such as water scarcity, deforestation, and glacial melt in the Caucasus mountains. Local communities benefit directly from initiatives that safeguard their ecosystems.

Finally, advancing **inclusive regional cooperation** strengthens resilience against external pressures. Initiatives that involve all Caucasus states and communities on equal footing create opportunities for shared prosperity and reduce the risk of marginalization or dominance by external actors.

These arguments together highlight that “serving the peoples of the Caucasus” requires a multidimensional approach that blends conflict resolution, socioeconomic investment, governance reform, and cultural respect.

Yet, this is not what the uncultivated teats are doing in Bruxelles. First, the EU Commission failed in getting a financial instrument dovetailing with the “purposeful activities”, then it disparaged of Ukraine’s warnings about Russia only to spend years to be recognized as an interlocutor of the BSEC. The lead partner of the EU in the Black Sea area : Turkey. This is not worthy of a common foreign and security policy – it is a reincarnation of a German-led modified institutionalized balance of power. And the citizens of the European Union will have none of it. Neither in word nor in deeds is the EEAS convincing, even less so the pompous donkies SG. To add hurt to injury, the EU now pretends that it is for reasons of military security that the soi disant corridor have to be completed , while paying lip-service to the need for the strengthening of anti-corruption policies in the eastern half of the EU.

Now, Russia, Turkey, and China each pursue distinct strategies in the South Caucasus and the broader Black Sea region. Russia relies primarily on hard power and coercion, seeking to maintain dominance through military presence, frozen conflicts, and leverage over energy flows. Turkey pursues a combination of identity politics and energy corridor diplomacy, weaving historical and cultural ties with strategic infrastructure projects. China limits itself largely to economic infrastructure while maintaining political neutrality. In this environment, the European Union can carve a unique and credible role by combining normative credibility, a smart energy strategy, and multilateral engagement through the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), positioning itself as a neutral yet reliable partner.

For such a strategy to have meaningful **impact** in the Black Sea region, the EU must undertake several complementary efforts. Politically, it requires consistent, principled, and impartial diplomacy: credible mediation mechanisms, coordination with regional and global partners, and promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In security terms, the EU should emphasize civilian missions, confidence-building, and institution-strengthening measures while avoiding coercion, demonstrating that stability can be reinforced through cooperation rather than confrontation. Economically, energy diversification through alternative supply routes and harmonization of transport and trade infrastructure are essential, alongside safeguards to prevent strategic dependencies arising from third-party investments. Soft power initiatives, including education, cultural exchanges, and support for independent media, will foster societal alignment with EU values.

The effectiveness of this approach is closely linked to forms of governance and the mentality of EU officials. Success depends on a **coherent, coordinated, and values-driven bureaucracy**, where member states and institutions work in alignment, translating policy into tangible outcomes rather than symbolic gestures. EU decision-makers must combine strategic patience with operational agility, balancing normative ambition with realistic assessment of regional constraints. Institutional vehicles such as the BSEC must evolve from formal frameworks into **practical platforms** for infrastructure development, SME support, digitalization, and climate resilience, thereby demonstrating that EU governance is not only principled but also effective and responsive.

Ultimately, for the EU to realize its strategic potential in the Black Sea, it must act as a **trustworthy and principled partner**, translating normative credibility into action, combining energy, economic, and security strategies, and cultivating governance practices that reflect a disciplined, value-oriented, and results-focused European mentality. By doing so, the Union can contribute to regional stability, strengthen its credibility, and uphold the values that define its Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Finally, there is a need for a new set of political guidelines on sub-regional cooperation. They could prioritize strategic cohesion, cross-border resilience, and inclusive governance, aligning with the EU's broader geopolitical and sustainability objectives.

To be effective, the next generation of political guidelines on sub-regional cooperation must reflect the evolving complexity of European territorial governance and the Union's ambition to act as a cohesive and resilient global actor. These guidelines should serve as a normative and operational framework for enhancing collaboration among regions that share geographic, economic, cultural, or environmental interdependencies, particularly within macro-regional strategies such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Baltic Sea Region, and the Adriatic–Ionian Region.

At their core, the guidelines should articulate a clear political commitment to strengthening multilevel governance. This entails empowering regional and local authorities to co-design and co-implement cross-border initiatives, supported by adequate financial instruments and technical assistance. The guidelines must also emphasize the importance of territorial solidarity, ensuring that sub-regional cooperation does not exacerbate disparities but instead fosters convergence and cohesion.

In terms of thematic priorities, the guidelines should integrate climate adaptation, energy transition, digital connectivity, and sustainable mobility as cross-cutting pillars. These areas are not only central to the EU's Green Deal and Digital Decade but also offer tangible opportunities for regions to collaborate on shared challenges. Furthermore, the guidelines should promote innovation ecosystems, cultural exchange, and youth engagement as drivers of long-term integration and democratic renewal.

Operationally, the guidelines should call for streamlined coordination between EU funding programs—such as Interreg, Horizon Europe, and the Cohesion Fund—and sub-regional platforms. This would enhance policy coherence and reduce administrative fragmentation. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be embedded to ensure accountability, transparency, and adaptive learning across participating regions.

These guidelines should reaffirm the EU's commitment to external cooperation by encouraging sub-regional partnerships with neighboring non-EU countries. This approach would reinforce the EU's geopolitical outreach and contribute to stability and prosperity in its immediate vicinity.

Finally, the paradox of Russian peacekeeping of the frozen conflicts is that it presented itself as an arbiter of peace even as its strategic interest rested in maintaining instability that only its troops could “manage”. This left Armenia and Azerbaijan simultaneously dependent on, and distrustful of, Russia's role. In essence, the various PKF, sanctioned by the UNSC was less a

neutral stabilizer than a geopolitical instrument – a guarantor of neither lasting peace nor renewed war, but of Moscow's *indispensability*. Thus, it is imperative the recalibration of the EU's Black Sea strategy proper is sized on to provide the conditions for sending the Russian colonialists packing back to where they should have stayed within Mother Russia's internationally recognized borders, in the barracks of Stavropol and in Rostov on Don.

Even so, Russia occupies a complex yet indispensable position in maintaining both regional and global security. Despite ongoing tensions with the West, Russia serves as a pivotal geopolitical counterweight to China's expanding influence throughout Eurasia. Preserving this delicate balance is critical to preventing destabilization and averting large-scale conflicts.

The key challenge is to cultivate cooperative frameworks that deter escalation while ensuring Russia remains sufficiently robust to effectively balance China's rise. Excessive isolation of Russia risks driving it into a closer alliance with China, thereby exacerbating regional instability and power imbalances.

Turkey's strategic geographical position as a nexus linking the European Union, the Caucasus, and Central Asia further enhances regional security dynamics. Through its facilitation of economic connectivity, cultural exchange, and diplomatic dialogue, Turkey acts as a vital conduit fostering cooperation and stability across these interdependent regions.

While Russia's tense relations with the West persist, it remains central to regional security and power dynamics. The Caucasus, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, is a key theater where Moscow seeks to maintain its influence and prevent China's growing economic reach from tipping the regional balance.

Conversely, the European Union's Global Gateway strategy aims to offer an alternative to China's BRI by promoting sustainable connectivity, infrastructure development, and digital partnerships across Eurasia. Turkey, strategically positioned as a bridge between the EU, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, plays a pivotal role in this contest of influence. By facilitating trade, cultural exchange, and diplomatic engagement, Turkey helps channel the EU's vision for regional integration and stability.

The interplay between Russia's efforts to retain dominance, China's expansive BRI ambitions, and the EU's Global Gateway initiatives creates a complex geopolitical landscape. Managing this balancing act in the Caucasus is critical: it not only shapes the future of regional security but also determines which global powers will influence the economic corridors that connect Europe and Asia.

In this context, sustaining regional partnerships and cooperation is essential to prevent conflict, promote stability, and harness the potential of the Caucasus as a true global gateway linking East and West. For Russia, the deal is to maintain apparent hegemony in the Black Sea, for the EU and US the stakes are to prevent World War III by keeping both regions open and its energy resources outside Russian overall control.

In sum, nurturing geopolitical equilibrium through resilient regional partnerships is essential for conflict prevention, underpinning sustained peace and security within an increasingly complex and interconnected landscape.

After all, the Pontic-Caspian steppe constitutes a vast expanse of grasslands and plains that extends from the northern shores of the Black Sea (traditionally referred to as Pontus) to the Caspian Sea. Geographically, it encompasses significant portions of modern-day Ukraine, southern Russia, western Kazakhstan, and parts of the Caucasus region. The steppe's physical geography, characterized by its flat terrain and absence of formidable natural barriers, has historically rendered it an ideal corridor for the movement of peoples, goods, and armies. This open landscape facilitated extensive patterns of migration, trade, and military incursions, serving as a conduit for nomadic and semi-nomadic groups such as the Scythians, Huns, and Mongols.

The region is further interconnected by a series of major river systems—including the Dnieper, Don, and Volga—which flow southward toward the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. These waterways not only enabled internal connectivity within the steppe zone but also linked it to the broader Eurasian interior and to maritime networks, thus enhancing its role in long-distance exchange and imperial expansion.

Culturally and historically, the Pontic-Caspian steppe holds profound significance. It is widely regarded as the *Urheimat*, or original homeland, of the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language family, according to the influential Kurgan Hypothesis. From this locus, Indo-European-speaking populations are believed to have dispersed into both Europe and South Asia, bringing with them not only linguistic traditions but also transformative technologies such as horse domestication and wheeled transport. Over successive centuries, the steppe served as a meeting point and contested frontier among various civilizations and empires, becoming a dynamic zone where Indo-European, Turkic, Slavic, and later Islamic and Christian influences intermingled.

In the contemporary period, the Pontic-Caspian region retains critical strategic importance, particularly in the domains of energy and security. A complex network of oil and gas pipelines—most notably those originating in the Caspian basin—traverses the region, linking energy producers in Central Asia and the Caucasus with consumer markets in Europe and Asia. Infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor underscore the region's pivotal role in global energy transit. Furthermore, the area forms part of the "Middle Corridor," a key east-west trade route under China's Belt and Road Initiative, reinforcing its position as a linchpin in Eurasian connectivity.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Pontic-Caspian steppe functions as a strategic buffer zone between Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. Since the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine, the region has emerged as a focal point of tension between NATO-aligned actors and Moscow. Military alliances and rivalries continue to shape the region's security environment, with overlapping interests from actors such as Russia, the European Union, Turkey, and China. In this context, the region's historical role as a frontier of empire has been rearticulated in modern terms as a space of strategic contestation and influence.

The Pontic-Caspian steppe also embodies the dual character of being both a cultural bridge and a zone of recurrent conflict. Historically, it enabled East-West exchanges, including those facilitated by the ancient Silk Road. At the same time, its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity has made it a locus of persistent instability. Contemporary flashpoints such as

Chechnya, Dagestan, and Nagorno-Karabakh illustrate the ongoing challenges of political integration and interethnic coexistence within and across national borders.

In sum, the Pontic-Caspian steppe is not only a geographically contiguous zone but also a deeply interconnected and historically consequential region. Its significance spans from prehistoric cultural dispersals and technological innovations—such as the domestication of the horse and the development of chariot warfare—to present-day geopolitical and economic imperatives. Understanding the structural dynamics of this space is thus essential for any comprehensive analysis of Eurasian history, strategy, and infrastructure development.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of the findings regarding EU engagement in the South Caucasus encompass several dimensions related to regional cooperation, peacebuilding, and external influence.

Firstly, the findings underscore the necessity of reconceptualizing traditional models of international relations, particularly through the lens of post-imperial theory. The persistence of geopolitical rivalries and historical conflicts necessitates frameworks that transcend binary notions of influence, advocating for plural sovereignty and decentralized power structures. This aligns with theoretical perspectives that emphasize the significance of local agency and the dynamics of power relations in international engagements.

Secondly, the emphasis on designing cooperation models that prioritize mutual benefits speaks to relevant theories of interdependence and cooperative security. By framing the South Caucasus as a network of interdependencies, the findings suggest a departure from zero-sum paradigms that dominate traditional security studies. This indicates that theoretical frameworks must evolve to encompass cooperative mechanisms that not only address immediate security concerns but also foster broader socio-economic integration.

Thirdly, the findings illuminate the role of external actors in shaping the political landscape, challenging conventional notions of state sovereignty. The interplay of external influences highlights the need for theoretical frameworks that integrate concepts of soft power, normative influence, and regional legitimacy. The prospect of external actors, such as the EU, fostering stability through economic support and civil society engagement suggests a dynamic interplay that requires a re-evaluation of traditional power hierarchies in international relations.

Lastly, the strategies proposed for enhancing EU engagement signal a shift towards context-sensitive and localized approaches in international relations theory. This suggests that the effectiveness of peace-building initiatives is contingent upon understanding and integrating local realities, emphasizing a more grounded and inclusive approach to international policy frameworks.

Consequently, the theoretical implications of the findings advocate for a more nuanced understanding of regional cooperation, security dynamics, and the interplay of local and external influences in shaping the South Caucasus' political and economic landscape. These insights can contribute to the broader discourse in international relations by highlighting the

complexities of post-imperial dynamics and the necessity for innovative frameworks that prioritize collaborative and inclusive engagement.

Further Research

Further research on the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Caucasus region can explore several pertinent themes that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

One significant area of inquiry could involve examining the effectiveness of BSEC as a multilateral platform for regional cooperation. This research could analyze the organizational structure, operational weaknesses, and the current political and economic landscape to determine how BSEC can overcome its historical inefficiencies and enhance its role in fostering collaborative initiatives among member states.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of BSEC with other regional cooperation models, such as the EU's Eastern Partnership or the Eurasian Economic Union, could provide insights into varying approaches to regional integration. This examination may highlight best practices and potential synergies that BSEC could leverage to strengthen its impact on economic development and stability in the Caucasus.

Another critical aspect to explore is the interplay between external actors, such as the European Union, NATO, and Russia, and their influence on BSEC's objectives and negotiations.

Understanding how these actors shape regional policy, security dynamics, and economic flows can contribute to a more nuanced perspective of the geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus. This research could also investigate how BSEC can navigate competing interests from these external powers while achieving collective goals.

Furthermore, the role of civil society and local stakeholders within the BSEC framework should be addressed. Examining their involvement in decision-making processes, project implementation, and the promotion of cross-border cooperation can shed light on the importance of grassroots engagement in driving regional integration.

Lastly, research could focus on specific sectors, such as energy, transportation, and trade, to assess the tangible outcomes of BSEC initiatives on regional economic resilience and connectivity. By exploring case studies of successful projects or partnerships within the BSEC framework, researchers could evaluate the implications for sustainable development and long-term stability in the Caucasus region. In summary, further research on BSEC and the Caucasus should focus on the effectiveness of regional cooperation mechanisms, comparative analysis with other models, the influence of external actors, the role of civil society, and sector-specific assessments. This multifaceted approach can enrich the discourse on regional integration and aid in the development of strategies that enhance collaboration and stability in the South Caucasus.

Counterarguments

Counter-arguments against the EU's Caucasus strategy can be organized around several critical dimensions that challenge its effectiveness and feasibility.

One significant counterargument centers on the geopolitical reality of the region. The South Caucasus is historically influenced by powerful neighboring states, such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which often view EU initiatives as encroachment on their spheres of influence. This geopolitical dynamic creates substantial resistance to EU engagement and may undermine the objectives of the strategy. The potential for backlash from these regional powers could lead to heightened tensions rather than stability.

Another critical concern is the issue of conditionality associated with EU integration processes. Some critics argue that the EU's reliance on conditionality can be counterproductive. Local stakeholders may perceive EU requirements as imposing external values or norms that do not align with regional contexts, prompting resistance and skepticism towards EU initiatives. This reluctance to embrace conditionality can hinder cooperation and complicate the implementation of reforms necessary for integration.

There is also apprehension regarding the EU's capacity to balance competing interests within the region. The divergent political systems and historical animosities among the South Caucasian states complicate the EU's efforts to foster collaboration. Critics argue that the EU may struggle to create a coherent strategy that addresses the distinct needs and aspirations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, potentially resulting in fragmented or inconsistent policies.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the EU's Caucasus strategy is challenged by internal divisions within the EU itself. Differing priorities among member states regarding engagement with the South Caucasus can lead to a lack of unity in diplomatic efforts, diluting the EU's influence and credibility in the region. This inconsistency may undermine the EU's ability to act as a reliable partner and mediator, further complicating efforts to promote stability and integration.

Another counterargument emphasizes the limitations of the EU's soft power approach. Critics argue that while the EU seeks to promote democratic values, human rights, and economic development, these ideals may not resonate in societies facing immediate concerns, such as security and territorial integrity. The EU's soft power may be viewed as insufficiently robust in addressing the pressing security challenges in the region, particularly in light of unresolved conflicts, such as those in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

Finally, the potential for over-reliance on the EU as an external guarantor of security raises concerns about the emergence of indigenous regional ownership. Critics warn that excessive dependence on EU intervention may inhibit local actors from fully engaging in conflict resolution and regional cooperation. There is a risk that the EU's involvement could inadvertently shape dependency rather than fostering self-sufficiency and resilience within the South Caucasian states.

In summary, counterarguments against the EU's Caucasus strategy highlight the geopolitical complexities of the region, the challenges of conditionality, the difficulty of balancing diverse interests, internal EU divisions, limitations of soft power, and concerns about fostering regional ownership. These critiques suggest the need for a nuanced and more adaptable approach in envisioning effective engagement in the South Caucasus.

Policy Recommendations

The Black Sea is emerging as one of the most strategically contested and economically significant regions on Europe's periphery. It is a maritime crossroads linking the EU with the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, and a vital corridor for energy, transport, and digital infrastructure. Russia's war against Ukraine has heightened the urgency of securing this space, while climate pressures, environmental degradation, and social fragility underscore the need for a comprehensive, multidimensional response.

At present, EU policies toward the region are fragmented across the Eastern Partnership, Global Gateway, the European Green Deal, and ad hoc security cooperation. A more coherent strategy is needed to integrate these strands into a unified vision that combines hard and soft security, infrastructure investment, environmental stewardship, and inclusive governance.

The overarching objectives of the strategy are to enhance security and resilience, integrate the Black Sea and Southeastern Europe into Europe's infrastructure and ecological transition, and provide a structured multilateral framework for regional cooperation. These goals require a multidimensional approach that combines immediate crisis management with long-term development, linking the EU's internal cohesion with its external neighbourhood policies.

Contrary to the perception of the EEAS, there is nothing new in the nature of the and delivery mechanism of the Black Sea Strategy. There is a great deal of continuity in action or rather it is characterized by bureaucratic inertia and failure of leadership. It is not the territorial impact of the fall of the Wall that is at issue as outlined in the report by Tad Planet informing policy since the 1998'ies but the effectiveness of the policy framework in order realizing the objectives and values of the European Union that must be in focus. The delivery mechanism, a disparate amounts of funds geared to different purposes makes all but certain that the EAAS will fail in its Treaty-bound mandate to restore peace, stability and security in Europe's near abroad , an area that is consequential for European security since it is host to the biggest armies in Europe.

A coherent EU Black Sea strategy requires a blend of security, connectivity, sustainability, and partnership. Policy recommendations should link the EU's internal cohesion with its external neighbourhood engagement while addressing both hard and soft dimensions of security. Based on the geopolitical, economic, and environmental dynamics of the region, several recommendations stand out.

First, the EU should institutionalize a **comprehensive Black Sea Strategy Framework** that aligns existing initiatives such as the Global Gateway, the Eastern Partnership, and the Three Seas Initiative with Black Sea-specific priorities. Establishing a clear governance structure, potentially through a dedicated coordination unit within the European External Action Service, would ensure consistency and visibility.

Second, Brussels should **enhance maritime security and freedom of navigation** by supporting regional naval coordination, information-sharing platforms, and coast guard capacity-building for littoral states. This would strengthen deterrence against hybrid threats, ensure secure sea lines of communication, and complement NATO's role without duplicating it.

Third, the EU could **expand energy connectivity and resilience** by co-financing cross-border energy projects. The Black Sea submarine electricity cable between Georgia and

Romania should be prioritized as a strategic infrastructure project under Global Gateway. Similarly, the diversification of LNG and pipeline routes, along with hydrogen-ready infrastructure, would strengthen the region's contribution to EU energy security.

Fourth, **green transition and environmental protection** must be elevated. The Black Sea faces acute ecological pressures from pollution, overfishing, and climate change. The EU should fund joint monitoring, marine research, and coastal ecosystem restoration under a "Black Sea Green Pact," thereby linking environmental security to regional stability.

Fifth, Brussels should support **infrastructure connectivity that integrates the Black Sea into European transport corridors**. Investments in ports such as Constanța, Varna, Poti, and Anaklia, when linked with inland corridors like Rail2Sea and Via Carpathia, would create multimodal routes connecting Central Europe with the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Sixth, the EU should invest in **digital and cyber connectivity**. Supporting Black Sea fiber optic cables and data centers would reduce vulnerabilities to external influence and enhance digital sovereignty across the region.

Seventh, **human security and societal resilience** deserve greater attention. Cross-border programs in education, youth mobility, and public health would strengthen people-to-people ties and reduce social disparities that external actors might exploit.

Eighth, Brussels should work to **build regional multilateralism** by revitalizing the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and creating formats that include both EU member states and partner countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Such platforms would foster trust and practical cooperation even in a fragmented security environment.

Ninth, a specialized EU office should be established to coordinate engagement with subregional organizations, including BSEC, CBSS, BEAC, and the Arctic Council. This office would harmonize EU positions, prevent duplication, and ensure continuity across regions.

Tenth, the EU should transition from observer status to a structured partnership role, with permanent liaison staff and co-financing of regional projects. This would allow Brussels to shape the agenda more effectively and strengthen its role in Black Sea governance.

Eleventh, the EU should articulate how its policies toward the Black Sea, Baltic, Barents, and Arctic interconnect. This would identify shared themes such as maritime security, environmental sustainability, and digital resilience, and apply lessons across regions.

Twelfth, Brussels should facilitate an annual forum bringing together BSEC, CBSS, BEAC, and the Arctic Council alongside EU institutions. This would enable exchange of best practices, alignment of project pipelines, and build synergies across Europe's maritime basins.

The establishment of a dedicated financial instrument under one of the EEAS budget lines, as initially envisaged by Francois Lammoreux, provides the mechanism to allocate and disburse resources efficiently, while guaranteeing compliance with EU financial regulations. This instrument allows the Union to pool funds for projects that cut across sectors and borders, combining EU contributions with co-financing from partner states and private actors. By linking financial oversight directly with operational coordination, the EEAS office for subregional

cooperation is empowered to monitor project progress, enforce adherence to EU standards, and ensure alignment with strategic objectives. Furthermore, this centralization facilitates close coordination with EU delegations, member states, and partner countries, creating a streamlined interface that strengthens the Union's credibility, effectiveness, and long-term influence in Southeastern Europe and the Black Sea region and wider afield, including rules for the level of engagement with Russian officials, with whom dialogue is desirable.

We have asked the Court of Auditors to intervene in the matter and to examine the causes of policy failure and administrative disarray aggravated by corruption in the Member States. We expect the three high-ranking Eurocrats in the SG and the EEAS involved in misleading the public and lying to the citizens and engaged in games of smoke and mirror combined with *echappatoire* to be investigated and persecuted under Belgium law penal code 456-459 and the EU Treaty articles 21 and 218. We recall EU delegations, member states, and partner countries remain legally bound to adhere to the principles of transparency, efficiency, and sound financial management under the EU Financial Regulation (Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046). The palette of sanctions encompasses: Formal reprimands or warnings, Suspension from duties, Demotion or transfer and Dismissal from public office.

Thirteenth, to improve the delivery and implementation of EU foreign policy, the Union must enhance strategic coherence, streamline decision-making, and strengthen its operational instruments, particularly through greater use of qualified majority voting and better coordination between institutions. There are 3500 books out there on Strategic Management, but a common denominator is how to move from strategy to implementation through ends-means-ways. This is as much about pain at EEAS HQ as the receiving end partnering-up, which then necessitates understanding, sound implementation, no silos, sound administrative culture and adequate greasing. To lead change strong leadership and good governance is necessary.

The European Union's foreign policy apparatus, anchored in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), has long struggled with fragmentation, slow responsiveness, and limited geopolitical impact. These challenges stem from both institutional constraints and divergent national interests among member states. To address these shortcomings, the EU must pursue reforms that reinforce its capacity to act decisively and consistently on the global stage.

One critical area for improvement is the decision-making process. The unanimity requirement in CFSP matters often leads to paralysis or diluted outcomes. Expanding the use of *qualified majority voting* (QMV), as permitted under certain treaty provisions, would allow the EU to respond more swiftly to international crises and adopt more robust positions. This shift would require political consensus and confidence-building among member states, particularly those wary of losing veto power.

Institutional coordination must also be strengthened. The European External Action Service (EEAS), the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the European Commission must operate with greater synergy. Clearer mandates, shared strategic planning, and integrated operational platforms would reduce duplication and enhance policy coherence. Moreover, the European Parliament's role in scrutinizing foreign policy should be expanded to ensure democratic accountability and legitimacy.

Operational delivery can be improved through better resourcing and deployment of EU instruments. This includes enhancing the capacity of EU delegations, increasing funding for rapid response mechanisms, and leveraging trade and development tools to support foreign policy objectives. The EU should also invest in strategic foresight and scenario planning to anticipate global shifts and align its external actions accordingly.

Integrating the Black Sea and Southeastern Europe into a comprehensive EU strategy transforms the region from a vulnerable periphery into a hub of security, connectivity, and cooperation. By combining maritime, energy, infrastructure, digital, environmental, and societal initiatives under EEAS oversight and linking them with robust subregional engagement, the EU can secure its southeastern flank, foster economic resilience, and strengthen multilateral governance. This approach positions the Union as both a stabilizing force and a driver of sustainable development in a strategically vital part of Europe.

To enhance their partnership with the European Union and transition from a position of dependency and supplicants to one of mutual cooperation and partner, Caucasus countries should undertake several strategic initiatives. First, it is imperative that these states articulate clear and coherent strategic interests that align with those of the EU. Rather than approaching the EU primarily as recipients of aid, they must demonstrate the value they offer in terms of regional stability, trade facilitation, and energy security.

Second, strengthening institutional capacity through governance reforms, adherence to the rule of law, and anti-corruption measures will significantly increase their credibility as reliable partners. Such reforms foster trust and create an enabling environment for sustained cooperation.

Third, implementing comprehensive economic reforms aimed at diversification, improving the business climate, and enhancing infrastructure will attract EU investment and facilitate deeper economic integration. These reforms should be complemented by proactive regional cooperation efforts that address longstanding conflicts and promote joint development projects, signaling a collective commitment to stability and progress.

Fourth, the EU's power is structural but the Caucasian states also are weakly structured. While the European Union's influence is underpinned by robust institutional structures and significant economic and political leverage, the Caucasus states remain characterized by comparatively weak institutional frameworks and limited governance capacity. In this encounter, the EU's strength lies in its robust structures, while the Caucasus' weakness stems from its fragile institutions; where the EU builds power through structure, the Caucasus is weakened by its lack thereof. This structural asymmetry challenges the establishment of equitable partnerships and underscores the urgent need for institutional strengthening within the region to better engage with the EU on a more balanced footing.

Moreover, the Caucasus states should leverage their geopolitical position as pivotal transit corridors linking Europe and Asia, underscoring their strategic importance for EU connectivity initiatives. Engaging proactively in EU-led regional initiatives and dialogues will enable these countries to shape policy agendas rather than merely respond to them.

Finally, fostering a robust civil society aligned with European values will underpin domestic support for integration and reform, ensuring that commitments are sustained beyond political elites. By adopting these strategies, Caucasus countries can reposition themselves as equal and strategic partners, thereby facilitating a more balanced and effective partnership with the European Union. The European Union exerts its power through principles, predictability, and prosperity, while the Caucasus contributes position, passage, and potential; where the EU brings structure seeking strategy, the Caucasus brings strategy seeking structure.

Perspective

This isn't merely a strategy paper. It is a meditation on the post-imperial condition of a region long caught between empires, ideologies, and identities. The text does not simply outline institutional models—it interrogates the very grammar of sovereignty, legitimacy, and cooperation. It asks: what does it mean to build peace in a space where borders are contested, memory is fractured, and power is layered?

From that vantage point, several interpretive lenses emerge. The document reframes the Caucasus not as a buffer zone but as a relational space. It challenges the imperial logic of extraction and domination, proposing instead a framework built on plural sovereignty, ethical borders, and ecological stewardship. This is not just policy—it is a reimagining of political geography.

The emphasis on reconciliation, truth-telling, and survivor-centric protocols suggests that peace is not a treaty—it is a lived, ongoing negotiation. The strategy does not treat conflict resolution as a checkbox but as a cultural and institutional transformation.

Rather than advocating rigid supranational structures, the document favors networks—economic corridors, cultural exchanges, and ecological cooperation. This marks a subtle but profound shift from top-down integration to bottom-up interdependence.

The EU's role is envisioned not as a hegemon but as a scaffold—providing standards, resources, and guarantees without displacing local agency. The SC+1 format is not a power grab; it is a balancing act between credibility and non-alignment.

Environmental stewardship is not treated as an add-on—it is central. The strategy positions climate resilience, marine data, and ecological justice as tools of diplomacy, not merely instruments of sustainability. This represents a quiet revolution in how regional cooperation is conceptualized.

Expansionism and Overextension: A Comparative Perspective

European Union

The EU's enlargement strategy, particularly since the end of the Cold War, has been characterized by a normative approach aimed at promoting democratic values, rule of law, and market economies in neighboring countries. While this strategy has been largely successful in stabilizing Central and Eastern Europe, it has also faced challenges. The 2004 enlargement,

which included ten new member states, highlighted issues such as institutional strain, economic disparities, and political disagreements among member states. These challenges underscore the risks of overextension, where the ambition to integrate new members can outpace the Union's capacity to assimilate them effectively. As noted in recent analyses, the EU must adopt a more cautious and strategic approach to future enlargements, considering factors like institutional readiness and the ability to manage internal diversity [Good Authority](#).

United States

The US has historically engaged in expansionist policies, particularly during the 19th century under the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which justified territorial expansion across North America. This ideology was rooted in a belief in American exceptionalism and divine providence. However, such expansion led to significant conflicts, including the Mexican-American War and the displacement of Native American populations. In the 20th and 21st centuries, US interventions in regions like the Middle East have also been critiqued for overextension. Scholars argue that these interventions often lacked clear objectives and exit strategies, leading to prolonged engagements with limited success.

Western Bloc

The broader Western bloc, encompassing NATO and EU policies, has also faced challenges related to expansionism. The eastward expansion of NATO and the EU has been perceived by some as provocative, straining relations with Russia and contributing to geopolitical tensions. The incorporation of countries with unresolved territorial disputes or democratic backsliding poses risks to the cohesion and stability of these organizations. As highlighted in recent policy discussions, the West must reassess its approach to enlargement, focusing on the capacity of candidate countries to meet membership criteria and the potential implications for regional stability.

Historical experience shows that both the European Union and the United States face critical challenges when territorial or functional expansion outpaces institutional capacity. In the EU, successive enlargements have occasionally strained governance structures, resulting in slower decision-making, coordination difficulties, and uneven resource allocation among member states. These strains can reduce policy effectiveness, undermine cohesion, and expose structural vulnerabilities in areas such as fiscal management, regulatory harmonization, and common foreign and security policy.

Similarly, the United States' historical territorial expansions and international commitments—particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries—highlight the risks of overextension. Overly ambitious engagements, without commensurate institutional or administrative capacity, have historically led to overstretched resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and strategic misalignments.

Comparing the two cases reveals subtle but important differences. US overextension often occurred in contexts of global projection, where logistical reach and military commitments outpaced domestic governance adaptation. In contrast, the EU's challenges are predominantly internal, focusing on political cohesion, subsidiarity, and the capacity of supranational institutions to harmonize diverse legal, economic, and social systems. Consequently, while the

US experience emphasizes the dangers of global strategic overreach, the EU must prioritize the internal consolidation of institutional processes, ensuring that enlargement enhances rather than diminishes governance coherence.

The overarching lesson is that expansion—whether geographic, economic, or strategic—requires careful calibration with the capacity of institutions to absorb, integrate, and govern new actors or responsibilities. For the EU, this underscores the need to strengthen decision-making mechanisms, improve coordination among core and periphery states, and ensure that resource distribution aligns with both political and operational demands. For the West more broadly, historical overextensions suggest the value of incremental engagement, robust administrative structures, and a continuous assessment of institutional readiness before further enlargement or strategic commitment.

In the shadowed valleys of the Caucasus, where empires once marched and memories still bleed, a new dawn waits—trembling, tentative, but radiant with possibility. The South Caucasus, that ancient crucible of civilizations, has long been a chessboard for imperial hands, its kings and pawns moved by distant capitals, its borders drawn with the ink of ambition rather than the quill of consent. But the age of empires is not eternal. The hourglass has turned. And in the soft but steady light of Europe, a different future glimmers.

The European Union is not a fortress of dominion, but a lighthouse of dignity. It does not arrive with boots and banners, but with ballots and bridges. It does not conquer—it convenes. It does not dictate—it dialogues. Like a gardener tending to a long-neglected orchard, it coaxes sovereignty from the soil, waters it with rule of law, and shelters it beneath the canopy of shared norms. Where others bring pipelines and patronage, the EU brings patience. Where others offer allegiance, it offers alignment—voluntary, principled, and profound.

Let us not mistake quiet strength for weakness. The EU is no brittle idealist. It is a continent that has buried its own empires, wept over its own ruins, and risen from its own ashes. It is the phoenix that remembers the fire. And in that memory lies its power: to guide others not through force, but through example. It is the midwife of modernity, the incubator of peace, the gentle architect of a post-imperial order.

To the South Caucasus, the EU offers not a leash, but a ladder. It does not ask nations to forget their pasts, but to transcend them. It does not erase identity—it elevates it. In Brussels, Tbilisi is not a periphery—it is a partner. In Strasbourg, Yerevan is not a supplicant—it is a sovereign. And in this shared agora of nations, even the smallest voice echoes with dignity.

The region need not choose between silence and subjugation. There is a third path: one paved with treaties, not trenches; with customs unions, not clientelism; with Erasmus exchanges, not exile. The EU does not promise utopia—but it offers something rarer: a future that belongs to the people who live it.

So let the Caucasus not be the graveyard of empires, but the cradle of a new order. Let it not be the echo chamber of old grievances, but the amphitheater of new harmonies. And let the European Union be the compass that guides—not by coercion, but by conviction. For in the long arc of history, it is not the sword that endures, but the scaffold of justice. And it is not the empire that prevails, but the idea whose time has come.

Appendix 1- Black Sea Sub-regionals

A subregion is a defined geographic or administrative area that constitutes a smaller part of a larger region or continent. It is typically delineated based on factors such as geographic proximity, cultural commonalities, economic characteristics, or political affiliations. The concept of subregional classification is widely employed in disciplines such as geography, international relations, and development studies to facilitate more nuanced analysis and targeted policy-making.

The rationale for establishing subregional divisions stems from the need to enhance administrative efficiency, promote regional cooperation, and address shared challenges among neighboring areas. Subregions often reflect historical, linguistic, or ethnic ties that distinguish them from other parts of the broader region. By grouping areas with similar attributes, subregional frameworks enable more coherent planning and implementation of policies, particularly in contexts where national boundaries may not fully capture the dynamics of local interactions.

Subregional classifications serve multiple practical purposes. In international governance, subregional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) facilitate collaboration on issues ranging from trade and security to environmental management. In economic development, sub-regions allow for the design of strategies tailored to specific needs, such as infrastructure investment or poverty alleviation. Environmental initiatives also benefit from sub-regional coordination, particularly in addressing transboundary concerns like water resource management or biodiversity conservation. Furthermore, sub-regional divisions are employed in statistical reporting by institutions such as the United Nations, which use them to organize data collection and analysis in a consistent and meaningful manner.

Sub-regional verticals act as helping nodes and allow for the exercise of leadership in specialized areas by the individual members of the regional organization sharing in power in the pursuit of common objectives.

In sum, subregional frameworks provide a valuable tool for understanding and managing the complexities of spatial organization, fostering cooperation, and enabling targeted interventions across various domains.

EU-Supported Center for Highlanders in Svaneti (Caucasus Regional Scope)

Objective: Anchor a Caucasus-wide initiative in Svaneti, combining cultural preservation, sustainable development, and cross-border cooperation, with the EU as strategic partner.

Program Components: Caucasus Highlands Initiative: Preserving Heritage, Empowering Communities, and Driving Sustainable Development

The Caucasus highlands are home to an extraordinary mosaic of mountain cultures, from the Svan and Ossetian peoples to the Chechen, Avar, Circassian, and Armenian highland communities. To preserve and celebrate this rich heritage, a Pan-Caucasus digital archive will document languages, rituals, music, and traditional practices, ensuring their accessibility for future generations.

Complementing this digital effort, an annual “Caucasus Highlands Festival” hosted in Mestia will rotate its focus among the region’s diverse communities, providing a dynamic platform for cultural exchange and mutual recognition. At the same time, specialized training programs in the restoration and conservation of vernacular mountain architecture will strengthen local capacity to safeguard historic structures, fostering pride and continuity in architectural traditions.

Sustainable development will form a core pillar of the initiative. Pilot eco-tourism networks will link Svaneti with highland routes across Armenia and the North Caucasus, integrating cultural tourism with environmental stewardship. The creation of an EU–Caucasus Highland Products Label will promote artisanal goods—cheese, honey, wool, and herbal teas—connecting local producers to wider markets while reinforcing cultural identity. Renewable energy microgrids, powered by hydro, solar, and biomass technologies, will provide reliable and sustainable energy to mountain communities, enhancing both resilience and economic opportunity.

Education and exchange are central to building a forward-looking Caucasus. The Caucasus Mountain Youth Leadership Academy in Svaneti, supported by EU faculty, will cultivate emerging leaders equipped to navigate the challenges of climate change, regional cooperation, and heritage preservation. Exchange programs with Alpine and Carpathian cultural centers will foster cross- regional learning, while joint research initiatives with European universities will advance knowledge on climate impacts and adaptive strategies for mountain environments.

Community empowerment will underpin the initiative’s social impact. Women’s cooperatives and cultural entrepreneurship programs will strengthen economic inclusion and social cohesion across highland communities. Cross-border sports diplomacy, encompassing mountaineering, trekking, and skiing, will serve as a mechanism for intercultural dialogue and regional collaboration. Civil society workshops focusing on conflict transformation and EU integration will support participatory governance, dialogue, and long-term stability in the highlands.

By integrating heritage preservation, sustainable development, education, and community empowerment, this initiative envisions a resilient, culturally vibrant, and economically dynamic Caucasus highlands—one that honors its traditions while embracing innovation and regional cooperation.

Isaak Babel Cultural Institute (Odessa, Ukraine)

Objective: Position Odessa as a hub of literary cosmopolitanism and cultural dialogue through Babel’s legacy, while linking to Black Sea regional and European cultural policy.

Strategic Vision: Black Sea Cosmopolitanism and Literary Heritage Initiative Overview

The Black Sea region has long embodied a cosmopolitan crossroads where Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian, and Caucasus communities have intersected, shaping urban culture, literature, and multilingual traditions. Anchored by the legacy of Isaak Babel and regional modernist literatures, this initiative seeks to preserve heritage, cultivate creativity, and foster transnational dialogue through an integrated program of education, research, and community engagement.

Objectives

- Preserve and promote the literary and cultural heritage of the Black Sea, emphasizing Jewish contributions in Ukraine and the nation-empire tension..
- Strengthen multilingualism and linguistic scholarship in Black Sea and Caucasus languages.
- Foster creativity and intercultural dialogue through structured creative writing, theatre, and digital programs.
- Empower youth and communities through participatory cultural and educational initiatives.
- Enhance regional and international cultural diplomacy through EU and BSEC partnerships.

Core Components

1. **Literary and Creative Programs:** Annual Isaak Babel Festival; theatre residencies; translation hub; creative writing courses.
2. **Research and Education:** Fellowships for scholars; public seminars on cosmopolitanism; linguistics course on Black Sea and Caucasus languages; Black Sea Urban Cultures Archive.
3. **Community Engagement:** Storytelling and writing clubs in schools; regional Young Writers Forum; intercultural workshops and mentorship programs.
4. **Digital Expansion:** Online Isaak Babel Museum; podcasts; MOOCs on literary modernism; digital exhibitions and educational content.

Expected Impact

- Preservation and increased accessibility of Black Sea literary and urban heritage.
- Development of a new generation of scholars, writers, and cultural leaders skilled in multilingual and intercultural engagement.
- Strengthened regional cohesion and international cultural networks.
- Increased youth participation in creative and scholarly activities.
- Visibility for the Black Sea as a vibrant center of cosmopolitan culture and intellectual exchange.

Measurable Outcomes

- Number of archival items digitized and publicly accessible.
- Annual participation rates in festivals, courses, and forums.
- Number of fellows, students, and young writers completing programs.
- Volume of translated works and digital content produced.
- New partnerships established with EU and BSEC institutions

By integrating heritage preservation, literary scholarship, linguistic research, creative writing, and community engagement, the initiative positions the Black Sea as a living laboratory of cosmopolitanism. It highlights Jewish, Ukrainian, and regional contributions to modernist literature while fostering cross-border collaboration, cultural diplomacy, and youth empowerment—ensuring the region’s legacy is both celebrated and forward-looking.

Six-Week BSEC Summer School on Region-Building & Identity-Making

(Istanbul + Regional Excursions)

Objective:

Cultivate the next generation of regional leaders who understand identity, cooperation, and policy in the Black Sea–Caucasus space.

Program Structure (6 Weeks):

- **Week 1: Orientation & Historical Context (Istanbul)**
 - Opening reception at Istanbul City Hall
 - Lectures on Black Sea history and BSEC institutions
 - Visit to the BSEC Secretariat
 - Field trip to multiethnic districts of Istanbul
- **Week 2: Institutions & Infrastructure**
 - Visit to the State Port Authority in Istanbul
 - Seminar on maritime trade, shipping, and connectivity
 - Simulation of a BSEC transport committee meeting
- **Week 3: Identity, Culture & Exchange**
 - Workshops on minorities, diasporas, and cultural diplomacy
 - Video meeting with students at the College of Europe, Tirana campus
 - Creative media projects: “Visualizing the Black Sea & Caucasus”
- **Week 4: Regional Dynamics & Conflict**
 - Lectures on Caucasus geopolitics and EU–BSEC relations
 - Case studies on frozen conflicts and peacebuilding
 - The Three Dyads: Greece-Turkey, Turkey-Ukraine and Russia-Turkey
 - Skills workshop on negotiation and mediation
- **Week 5: Comparative Experiences**

- Overnight study visit to Thessaloniki: exposure to Balkan history and EU integration narratives and BSEC's Thessaloniki outfit
- Day-long study at Thessaloniki's beach institutions (coastal urban planning, port authority, blue economy initiatives)
- **Week 6: Policy Lab & Graduation**
 - Group projects: policy briefs or creative outputs on regional identity-making
 - Closing public conference with EU diplomats, academics, and civil society
 - Graduation and alumni networking ceremony

Participants:

30–40 students/young professionals from BSEC and Caucasus countries, with EU observers.

Outputs:

Alumni network, published policy briefs, multimedia documentation of the summer school, certificate and exposure to students and professors and practitioners from the BSEC area and the EU.

Appendix 2 Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations

Between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia

The Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia (hereinafter referred to as "the Parties"),

- Recognizing the urgent necessity of establishing a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace in the region;
- Aspiring to contribute to this objective through the formalization of inter-state relations;
- Guided by the Charter of the United Nations, the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States, the 1975 Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Almaty Declaration of 21 December 1991;
- Committed to developing bilateral relations in accordance with the norms and principles enshrined in the aforementioned instruments;
- Expressing their mutual intent to foster good-neighborly relations;

Hereby agree to establish peace and inter-state relations on the basis of the following provisions:

Article I: Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

The Parties affirm that the boundaries of the former Soviet Socialist Republics have become the internationally recognized borders of the respective independent states. Accordingly, each Party shall respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, and political independence of the other.

Article II: Renunciation of Territorial Claims

In full compliance with Article I, the Parties declare that they hold no territorial claims against each other and shall refrain from raising such claims in the future. No Party shall engage in or support any act—whether direct or indirect—that seeks to undermine the territorial integrity or political unity of the other.

Article III: Non-Use of Force

The Parties shall abstain from the use or threat of force in their mutual relations, particularly against each other's territorial integrity or political independence, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. Neither Party shall permit third parties to use its territory for hostile actions against the other Party.

Article IV: Non-Intervention

The Parties shall refrain from any form of interference in each other's internal affairs.

Article V: Diplomatic Relations

Within [specified number] days following the exchange of instruments of ratification, the Parties shall establish diplomatic relations in accordance with the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular Relations (1961 and 1963).

Article VI: Border Delimitation and Demarcation

In accordance with Article I, the Parties shall engage in good-faith negotiations through their respective border commissions to conclude an agreement on the delimitation and demarcation of their shared border.

Article VII: Border Security

The Parties shall not permit the deployment of third-party forces along their mutual border. Pending final border delimitation and demarcation, they shall implement mutually agreed security and confidence-building measures, including in the military domain, to ensure stability in border regions.

Article VIII: Combating Extremism and Discrimination

The Parties condemn and shall actively combat intolerance, racial hatred, discrimination, separatism, violent extremism, and terrorism within their jurisdictions, in accordance with their international obligations.

Article IX: Missing Persons and Reconciliation

The Parties commit to addressing cases of missing persons and enforced disappearances arising from past armed conflict. This includes the exchange of all available information, cooperation with international organizations, and efforts to locate, identify, and return remains. A separate agreement shall outline the modalities for these efforts, which are recognized as essential to reconciliation and confidence-building.

Article X: Sectoral Cooperation

The Parties may conclude agreements to foster cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including economic development, transit and transport, environmental protection, humanitarian assistance, and cultural exchange.

Article XI: International Obligations

This Agreement shall not infringe upon the Parties' existing rights and obligations under international law or treaties with other UN Member States. Each Party shall ensure that its international engagements do not conflict with the commitments undertaken herein.

Article XII: Legal Supremacy and Treaty Integrity

The Parties shall be guided by international law and this Agreement in their bilateral relations. Domestic legislation shall not be invoked to justify non-compliance. In accordance with the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), the Parties shall refrain from actions that would defeat the object and purpose of this Agreement prior to its entry into force.

Article XIII: Implementation Mechanism

The Parties shall establish a bilateral commission to oversee the implementation of this Agreement. The commission shall operate under modalities mutually agreed upon.

Article XIV: Dispute Resolution

The Parties shall endeavor to resolve any disputes concerning the interpretation or application of this Agreement through direct consultations, including within the commission established under Article XIII. If no resolution is reached within six months, the Parties shall pursue other peaceful means of dispute settlement.

Article XV: Withdrawal of Pre-Existing Claims

Without prejudice to Article XIV, the Parties shall withdraw or settle all pre-existing interstate claims, complaints, protests, and legal proceedings within one month of this Agreement's entry into force. They shall refrain from initiating or supporting any such actions in the future, including those brought by third parties. The Parties shall also abstain from hostile actions in diplomatic, informational, or other fields and shall conduct regular consultations to maintain peaceful relations.

Article XVI: Entry into Force

This Agreement shall enter into force upon the exchange of instruments confirming the completion of internal procedures in accordance with the national laws of the Parties. It shall be registered pursuant to Article 102 of the Charter of the United Nations.

Article XVII: Authentic Texts

This Agreement is executed in Azerbaijani, Armenian, and English, all texts being equally authentic. In the event of divergence in interpretation, the English text shall prevail.

Appendix 3 - Model Peace Agreement Between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia

Preamble

Recognizing the profound historical, cultural, and geographical ties between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia;

Acknowledging the importance of peace, stability, and cooperation in the South Caucasus region;

Affirming the commitment to the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs;

Expressing their mutual desire to normalize bilateral relations and to inaugurate a new era of dialogue, reconciliation, economic partnership, and regional integration;

Desiring to normalize bilateral relations and open a new chapter of mutual understanding, economic partnership, and regional integration;

The Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia (hereinafter referred to as "the Parties") hereby agree to the following:

Article I: Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

The Parties shall establish full diplomatic relations, including the exchange of ambassadors within sixty days of the signing of this Agreement. Embassies shall be opened in Ankara and Yerevan respectively.

Article II: Border Opening and Transit

The Parties agree to open their mutual land border for commercial and civilian transit within ninety days. Customs and border control procedures shall be coordinated to ensure secure and efficient movement.

Article III: Historical Dialogue and Reconciliation

A Joint Historical Commission shall be established to promote academic dialogue on shared historical issues. The Commission shall include historians and scholars from both countries and operate under the auspices of UNESCO.

Article IV: Economic Cooperation

The Parties commit to fostering bilateral economic ties by encouraging trade, investment, and joint ventures in sectors of mutual interest. They shall work towards removing barriers to commerce, facilitating cross-border infrastructure projects, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises to enhance economic integration.

Article V: Environmental Protection

Recognizing the shared responsibility for sustainable development, the Parties shall cooperate on environmental protection initiatives, including pollution control, natural resource management, and climate change mitigation. Joint programs and information exchange shall be promoted to preserve the ecological well-being of the region.

Article VI: Cultural Cooperation

The Parties recognize the vital role of cultural heritage and exchange in fostering mutual understanding and strengthening bilateral relations. They commit to promoting collaborative initiatives that celebrate their shared history, traditions, and artistic expressions. This includes the organization of joint cultural festivals, exhibitions, academic conferences, and the facilitation of exchanges between cultural institutions and professionals. The Parties shall also encourage the protection and preservation of cultural heritage sites of significance to both nations. To formalize these efforts, the Parties agree to negotiate and conclude a Cultural Cooperation Agreement within six months of signing this Agreement.

Article VII: Regional Integration and Cooperation

The Parties acknowledge that sustainable peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus depend on enhanced regional cooperation and integration. They commit to fostering multilateral dialogue and collaboration with neighboring countries and regional organizations to address shared challenges and opportunities. This includes coordinated efforts in areas

such as trade facilitation, infrastructure development, energy security, transport connectivity, and environmental sustainability.

The Parties shall work together to promote the establishment and strengthening of regional frameworks that encourage economic interdependence, cultural exchange, and political dialogue. By doing so, they aim to create a stable and inclusive regional environment conducive to investment, innovation, and social cohesion.

Furthermore, the Parties pledge to support regional conflict resolution initiatives and confidence-building measures that contribute to long-term stability. They recognize that deepening regional integration is essential to overcoming historical divisions and achieving collective development goals.

Article VIII: Implementation and Monitoring

To ensure effective implementation of this Agreement, the Parties shall establish a Joint Implementation Committee composed of representatives from both sides. This Committee shall convene at least twice annually to monitor progress, address challenges, and submit comprehensive reports to their respective governments.

Article IX: Dispute Resolution

Any disputes arising from the interpretation, implementation, or application of this Agreement shall be resolved amicably through direct consultations and negotiations between the Parties. Should the Parties fail to reach a settlement within a reasonable timeframe, they may seek mediation or arbitration through mutually agreed international mechanisms or institutions. Both Parties commit to refraining from actions that could escalate disputes or undermine the spirit of cooperation embodied in this Agreement.

Article X: Entry into Force

This Agreement shall enter into force upon ratification by both Parties' parliaments.

Annexes:

A prospective peace agreement between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey would be significantly strengthened by the incorporation of comprehensive annexes. These supplementary instruments would serve to delineate specific obligations, procedural frameworks, and implementation mechanisms, thereby enhancing legal precision, operational viability, and mutual confidence between the parties.

Annex I: Border Reopening and Infrastructure Coordination

This annex would detail the phased reopening of the Armenia–Turkey land border, specifying customs procedures, transit regulations, and joint infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and checkpoints. It would also include provisions for third-party monitoring, potentially involving observers from the European Union or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Annex II: Diplomatic Normalization

This section would outline the timeline and modalities for establishing embassies and consulates between the two nations. It would define diplomatic immunities and privileges in accordance with the Vienna Conventions and include protocols for bilateral visits and the formation of joint commissions to oversee diplomatic engagement.

Annex III: Historical Reconciliation Mechanism

Given the sensitive nature of historical disputes, this annex would establish a bilateral historical commission tasked with examining contested narratives, including the events of 1915. It would encourage academic exchange, archival cooperation, and public dialogue, possibly facilitated by international organizations such as UNESCO or the International Center for Transitional Justice.

Annex IV: Economic and Trade Cooperation

This annex would provide a framework for bilateral trade agreements, investment protections, and the establishment of business forums. It would identify priority sectors for collaboration, including agriculture, energy, and tourism, and incorporate mechanisms for resolving commercial disputes through arbitration or joint review panels.

Annex V: Cultural and Educational Exchange

To foster mutual understanding, this annex would promote cross-border cultural festivals, exhibitions, and language programs. It would facilitate student and faculty exchanges between universities and encourage joint preservation of shared heritage sites, contributing to long-term reconciliation.

Annex VI: Security and Non-Aggression Commitments

This section would reaffirm the principles of non-use of force and non-interference in internal affairs. It would establish a hotline and a joint security coordination mechanism to prevent misunderstandings and prohibit military deployments near the shared border without prior notification.

Annex VII: Humanitarian Cooperation

This annex would address humanitarian concerns such as missing persons, displaced populations, and refugee return. It would include cooperation with international organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and provide for joint disaster response and public health coordination.

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STATEMENT ON AI

In crafting this article, I explored the capabilities of several AI platforms to enrich my research and writing process. I utilized Microsoft Copilot (formerly Bing AI) for real-time web insights and contextual understanding, ChatGPT for generating and refining narrative structure, and Sharly AI to assist with summarizing complex documents and extracting key points. Each tool brought a unique strength to the table—whether it was speed, depth, or clarity—and together they helped streamline my workflow while expanding the scope of my analysis. AI Analysis is a digital method that retrieves information on human prompts converting them into knowledge creating a personal context. They save time and allows decision-makers to concentrate on strategic activities and human relationship. They should not be mistaken for an attempt to cut slack in the ranks of the opponent and in your own ranks and this researcher is not available for free lunches now willing to be reduced to slave monad in the network society's expanding informal politics. After completion , I proofread the piece. I take full responsibility for its content and its mistakes.