

# Georgia's Place in a Changing South Caucasus

## Preserving Relevance Amid Regional Transformation

---

*Elmira Amiraslanova*

---

A decade ago, it would have been unimaginable to think of a South Caucasus where the region's central transit state, and historically its most Western-oriented, would find itself increasingly detached from regional developments. Yet this is precisely the trajectory now confronting Georgia. Not through exclusion, but as a consequence of its own disengagement as perceived by those same Western powers.

It is hardly surprising that the South Caucasus is undergoing rapid and unprecedented transformation, the watershed moment being Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War, which ended decades of structural paralysis that had locked-in the region. Where unresolved conflict constrained the region's very geopolitical construct, this shift reflects a broader transition in which the region functions, producing new opportunities that the three South Caucasus states must leverage and adapt to, at a time when Russia's distraction with the conflict over Ukraine further widened room for maneuver.

What Zbigniew Brzezinski once characterized as a "grand chessboard"—a volatile, conflict-ridden region shaped by great power competition and zero-sum maneuvering—is now giving way to a space that more closely resembles what Svante E. Cornell and Damjan Krnjević Mišković have described as a "[card table](#)" whereby regional actors sit with greater agency, playing the cards they're dealt. And while the three states adapt to these changes in their own ways (depending on their position and resources), the fact is that the card table is one, and when one player moves ahead, another risks being left behind.

This IDD Analytical Policy Brief contends that Georgia's position in this metaphorical card game is gradually weakening. It builds on the metaphor introduced by Laura

---

*Elmira Amiraslanova is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.*

Linderman in her “[Divergent Paths in the South Caucasus](#)” essay in the current edition of *Baku Dialogues*—specifically that Azerbaijan holds the stronger hand (by leveraging energy resources, geographic importance, and military success), while Armenia plays a weaker hand the best it can given the circumstances.

This paper, however, introduces another dimension, arguing that Georgia, far from simply holding a weaker hand, is overplaying it, and therefore risks being marginalized in the postwar regional order that is still taking shape. In doing so, this policy brief examines two key factors: first, the broader structural shifts reshaping the South Caucasus; and second, the domestic political dynamics within Georgia that are overwhelming its foreign policy. Finally, it outlines what minimal steps Tbilisi must take to avoid losing its regional position.

## *A Region Moving Faster Than Georgia*

The turbulent geopolitics of the South Caucasus, fueled by ethno-political separatism and sustained by great-power meddling, shaped both the regional order and the foreign policy orientations of its three states for three decades. But that logic is now breaking down.

For years, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict locked the region into a state of structural paralysis. Closed borders and unresolved tensions shaped the geopolitical landscape, making Georgia the default transit state, not by design but because alternative routes were politically unviable.

The defining shift is the historic Azerbaijan-Armenia peace agreement, initiated on 8 August 2025 in Washington, and the subsequent steps in the normalization process of political and trade relations between the two countries. More than ending conflict in a political sense, it began to reorganize the region around connectivity. The implications of this peace are already showing in practice. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev confirmed that restrictions on cargo transport to Armenia had been lifted and [indicated](#) that the day when direct corridors between the two countries can bypass Georgia is “not too far away.” The message is clear: normalization creates options, and in doing so, reduces dependency on any single route.

Georgia’s absence from Davos and Trump’s Board of Peace, too, means that it might not fully benefit from the emerging unity in the South Caucasus and wider regional developments.

Despite stalled political relations with the U.S., Tbilisi still holds a bargaining hand that Washington—and, by extension, the EU—cannot ignore. At present, the Middle Corridor continues to transit exclusively through Georgia. These include key East-West routes, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan energy corridor, rail connections such as Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, and road infrastructure linking Baku, Tbilisi, and Batumi. In the short to medium

term, the transit route through Georgia is likely to remain the region's primary route simply because it's the only one that exists: it's the established route.

Cargo transported by Georgian Railway reached approximately 13.3 million tons of freight in 2025, with transit forming a core component of that volume. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, following recent upgrades, has expanded its annual capacity from around 1 million to 5 million tons, with plans to increase it further in the longer term. To date, Azerbaijan has exported its gas to 16 countries, and the export route still begins with Georgia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, too, has been operating successfully for nearly 20 years, with a throughput capacity of 1.2 million barrels per day. Moreover, even the recent commencement of trade between Azerbaijan and Armenia is conducted via Georgian territory.

In this regard, Ilham Aliyev's state visit to Tbilisi on 6 April 2026 and his meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze serve as a timely reminder that Georgia's transit role and its historically strong strategic partnership with Azerbaijan remain firmly recognized. As Aliyev noted during the joint press statements, 'the Middle Corridor passes through Azerbaijan and Georgia. This is our main transport artery, and additional efforts are being made — and will continue to be made — to expand it.'

Taken together, these factors make clear that Tbilisi's role as the region's primary transit and connectivity hub remains its strongest bargaining hand.

At the same time, however, new routes are beginning to take shape. The U.S. initiated Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) envisages a direct corridor connecting Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenia's Syunik region. While such projects will require substantial time and construction to materialize, the mere prospect of alternative routes is significant because they introduce competition into a space Georgia has dominated for decades.

The U.S., too, is playing a visible role in this shift, though not in the way Georgia has traditionally expected. America's engagement in brokering peace and supporting regional infrastructure signals a return to the South Caucasus, but on more pragmatic terms. Trump's 2025 National Security Strategy makes clear that the new administration will prioritize connectivity, energy security, transactional gains, and countering rival influence. And Georgia's strategic partnership and growing engagement with China, including the Chinese consortium set to build the Anaklia Deep Sea Port, certainly complicate this position.

Tbilisi, for its part, needs to be more actively involved in shaping the regional agenda emerging from the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process. That means re-engaging both with the normalization process itself and with Western stakeholders, and investing in the infrastructure that underpins its transit role. Without this, Georgia risks being sidelined in an order it once helped define.

## *How Domestic Politics is Overwhelming Foreign Policy*

If the first shift reshaping Georgia's position is structural, the second is decisively internal. The problem is not merely that the region is moving faster than Georgia; it is the perception that Georgia is no longer moving strategically at all. Where its neighbors leverage every window of opportunity to diversify their ties, Tbilisi's foreign policy today is seen as, at best, an interregnum in which the previous strategic framework of Euro-Atlantic integration has seen better days. Still, no new one has taken its place yet.

At the regional level, cooperation remains constrained by pressure from Moscow, where Tbilisi appears to be operating under the guiding principle of avoiding provocation. But the lessons learned by Serzh Sargsyan in 2018 and later Nikol Pashinyan in 2020 exemplify that, at least in the Armenian case, support from Moscow is conditional and may provide little comfort in the long run.

In a climate where Armenia and Azerbaijan are actively shaping the post-conflict regional agenda, Georgian foreign policy appears more reactive than strategic. The consequences are now visible across multiple areas. Georgia's relations with the EU and the United States, once the cornerstone of its strategic positioning, have deteriorated to their lowest point in decades. High-level engagement has been curtailed, financial assistance has been reduced, and political trust has eroded. More importantly, Georgia has increasingly been absent from key diplomatic and regional formats of engagement.

A recent example is the U.S. Vice President JD Vance's visit to Azerbaijan and Armenia, marking the highest-level American engagement with the South Caucasus since 2008. Omitted from this equation was Georgia—not by coincidence, but a logical outcome of the wall that had earlier been built with Washington. It has not yet come down at a time when U.S. engagement has returned to the region on more pragmatic, transaction-driven terms. Still, this may not prove to be the case much longer: growing regional pressures—including the situation around Iran—have prompted discussions about a potential Washington-Tbilisi reset, precipitated by a recent [‘productive’](#) phone conversation between Kobakhidze and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Yet the deterioration of Georgia's positioning cannot be understood as a one-sided process. The EU's approach toward Georgia has, in important respects, also been short-sighted. By choosing to ostracize and punish the Georgian leadership, Brussels has reduced its own leverage at a moment when influence matters most. The EU's actions against Georgia have not produced meaningful change; instead, they have accelerated Tbilisi's perceived drift away from one pole of the West. In a competitive region like the South Caucasus, absence is not a viable tool of pressure; it is an invitation for alternative actors to fill the vacuum.

Georgian analyst Irakli Sirbiladze makes a particularly useful observation in this regard. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia, he argues, are engaging with rival powers, and in

the current global distribution of power, this kind of multialignment works, but only under certain conditions. It is effective when states can engage rival actors simultaneously, such as the United States and China, because neither side can afford to lose them. That is the advantage of a state that holds real leverage.

Georgia, by contrast, appears to be attempting a similar approach without the same foundation. As Sirbiladze notes, Tbilisi is overplaying its hand, and its only meaningful bargaining position has been its role as a transit and connectivity hub between East and West. But this position is not fixed. It depends on maintaining ties with both ends of that corridor. As Georgia becomes increasingly isolated from one side, particularly the European Union, that leverage is no longer guaranteed.

### *What Georgia Must Do to Preserve Its Position*

What follows is a minimal set of steps required to prevent the erosion of Georgia's regional position. The objective here is not a full transformation, but rather a strategic preservation.

First, Georgia must re-engage in regional diplomacy. The Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process is reshaping the South Caucasus in real time, and Georgia's continued absence from it risks it becoming a bystander in a region it once helped structure. Engagement does not require mediation or leadership, but it does require a presence—at summits, in working-level formats, and in discussions surrounding emerging connectivity projects. In this regard, Aliyev's April 2026 visit to Tbilisi demonstrates that Georgia continues to be regarded as an important regional partner, with an established role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation. Without such participation, regional agendas will be set without Georgian input, and increasingly, without regard for its interests.

Second, Tbilisi must protect the credibility of its transit role, especially as new routes begin to emerge. For decades, Georgia's primary leverage has rested on its function as the primary east-west corridor, but this position is not self-sustaining. It depends on the continued efficiency of rail and port infrastructure, the reliability of customs and logistics systems, and the perception of Georgia as a stable and predictable transit partner. Preserving this position will require continued investments, as well as policy consistency and coordination with partners on both ends of the corridor.

Third, Georgia must rebuild a pragmatic working relationship with its Western partners. This does not imply a return to earlier narratives of inevitable integration, but it does require restoring a baseline of trust. Georgia's strategic value has always depended on its ability to connect regions, not isolate itself from one side of that connection. Without these functional ties to the EU and the U.S., its role as a bridge becomes difficult to sustain.

All in all, Georgia still holds a meaningful hand, but it is no longer the uncontested transit state of a frozen region. As the region evolves, opening windows of opportunity for all its actors, relevance will belong less to the actor best positioned by history than to the actor best able to adapt to new patterns of peace, connectivity, and external engagement. Tbilisi's challenge, therefore, is not to redefine its role entirely, but to prevent a temporary geographic advantage from becoming a lost one, and to act while it still has the capacity to shape the emerging regional order.