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THE STRUGGLE FOR INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE U.S. STRATEGY AGAINST THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF CHINA AND IRAN

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Abstract. The Second Karabakh War in 2020 significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, triggering a shift in the balance of power and creating new dynamics among regional and global actors. This article examines the evolving influence of major powers in the post-war period, with a particular focus on the United States' strategic response to the growing presence of China and Iran. The South Caucasus, serving as a critical bridge between Europe and Asia, has become a focal point of geopolitical competition due to its strategic location, energy resources, and key transit routes, such as the Zangezur Corridor. China's interest in the region is primarily driven by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to establish secure, diversified trade routes to reduce dependence on traditional maritime pathways. Concurrently, Iran seeks to maintain its regional influence through economic and political channels, opposing infrastructure projects like the Zangezur Corridor that could marginalize its role in transcontinental trade. The United States has adopted a dual strategy to counter these influences, conceptualized as the "*Geoeconomic Disruption Strategy*" targeting China's economic expansion, and the "*Military Containment Strategy*" aimed at limiting both Iranian and Chinese geopolitical maneuverability. Through strategic partnerships, particularly with Armenia, and military presence in the region, the U.S. seeks to disrupt China's economic ambitions while enhancing surveillance capabilities over Iran. The article highlights how Washington leverages these strategies to maintain its influence, prevent the consolidation of Sino-Iranian cooperation, and mitigate Russia's traditional dominance, which has been weakened post-war.

Key words: South Caucasus, U.S., China, Iran, Geopolitics, Regional Influence.

Introduction. The Second Karabakh War, which took place in 2020, fundamentally altered the balance of power in the South Caucasus and reshuffled the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Azerbaijan's swift military success and the restoration of its territorial integrity disrupted the long-standing status quo, paving the way for a new phase of competition among regional and global powers. This shift was marked by Russia's reaffirmation of its military presence, Turkey's growing diplomatic and military influence, and the reconsideration of South Caucasus policies by Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union. The post-war environment, characterized by both emerging security challenges and fragile stability, has compelled major powers to adopt more active and strategic approaches toward the region.

The study of these shifts in the South Caucasus, along with the evolving geopolitical dynamics of recent years, holds significant relevance for contemporary international relations scholarship. The region has transcended its traditional role as a localized conflict zone to become a critical arena for global power competition. Understanding the recalibration of foreign policies by major actors such as the U.S., Russia, China, and the EU is essential for analyzing the broader implications of regional security, energy politics, and the future trajectory of geopolitical alliances in the South Caucasus.

For this reason, the topic in question is being widely studied in Azerbaijan. For example, Cabarov (2021) explores the regional and global consequences of the Second Karabakh War, highlighting how the conflict reshaped power dynamics in the South Caucasus. The analysis emphasizes Azerbaijan's strategic gains and the shifting geopolitical landscape, providing a foundation for understanding

the post-war environment in which U.S., Chinese, and Iranian interests intersect. Bağırova (2022) examines the strategic interests of the United States in the South Caucasus, focusing on how Washington navigates its influence amidst regional conflicts. This work is particularly relevant in understanding the U.S.'s evolving role in countering the growing presence of external powers such as China and Iran. İsmayılzadə (2022) provides a comparative analysis of the European Union's and the United States' foreign policies toward the South Caucasus, shedding light on the differing approaches of Western actors in the region. The study highlights the U.S.'s emphasis on security and geopolitical influence, which aligns with its strategies to contain China and Iran. Məmmədov (2023) investigates Azerbaijan's modern geopolitical significance within the context of historical trade routes, particularly the Silk Road. This research underscores Azerbaijan's strategic location, which is central to both China's Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S.'s efforts to maintain regional influence. Cahangirli and Cabarov (2023) analyze regional security perspectives in the South Caucasus, focusing on the evolving threats and the role of external powers. Their insights into the security dynamics are critical for understanding the strategic environment in which the U.S. implements its military containment strategy against China and Iran. Talibova (2024) explores the role of the South Caucasus in U.S.-Russia relations, emphasizing the region's significance as a strategic arena for great power competition. The study provides a broader geopolitical context, highlighting how the U.S.'s actions against Russian influence also intersect with its strategies to limit Chinese and Iranian expansion. Jahangirli and Jabarov (2024) assess the geopolitical importance of the Zangezur Corridor, emphasizing its role in global power competition. Their analysis is directly relevant to understanding how infrastructure projects like the Zangezur Corridor influence the U.S.'s geoeconomic strategies to counterbalance China's regional ambitions.

In this regard, the objective of this article is to analyze the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus following the Second Karabakh War, with a specific focus on the U.S. strategy to counter the growing influence of China and Iran in the region. It aims to examine how the U.S. employs geoeconomic and military strategies to maintain its regional presence and strategic leverage. This study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive assessment of the U.S. strategic response to Sino-Iranian cooperation in the South Caucasus, highlighting the interplay between regional power shifts and global geopolitical competition.

The research employs a qualitative analytical approach, utilizing geopolitical theories, strategic documents, and empirical data to examine the interactions between the U.S., China, and Iran in the South Caucasus. Additionally, a network model is developed to visualize the complex web of geopolitical influences shaping the region's strategic landscape.

The Growing Interest of China and Iran in the Region in the Post-War Period

The South Caucasus serves as a critical bridge between Asia and Europe within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This region's geostrategic position enhances its significance as a vital transit corridor, facilitating the flow of goods, energy, and infrastructure development. The Middle Corridor, which connects China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus, is pivotal for diversifying China's trade routes, reducing reliance on traditional maritime pathways that are vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions. In this context, the operationalization of the Zangezur Corridor holds substantial importance. This corridor promises to create a direct land connection between Azerbaijan and its exclave, Nakhchivan, further linking to Turkey and Europe. China has a vested interest in this development, as it aligns with its objective to establish secure, efficient, and diversified trade routes. The Zangezur Corridor enhances connectivity within the Middle Corridor, offering China a strategic advantage in facilitating uninterrupted trade flow and strengthening its economic footprint in the region (Dumlu & Şahin, 2024).

China's interest in the Zangezur Corridor is also driven by its broader geopolitical strategy to solidify its presence in the South Caucasus. This infrastructure project not only improves logistical efficiency but also contributes to regional stability, which is crucial for China's long-term investments.

As a result, China actively supports initiatives that advance the operationalization of the corridor, viewing it as a key element in its Eurasian connectivity strategy (Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023).

However, Iran opposes the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor through Armenian territory, advocating instead for a route that traverses Iranian territory. Tehran perceives the corridor as a potential threat to its regional influence and economic interests, as it may marginalize Iran's role in transcontinental trade networks. This divergence has led to geopolitical frictions, reflecting broader strategic competition over control of regional transit routes. The conflicting interests between China's strategic priorities and Iran's regional ambitions underscore the complexities surrounding the development of the Zangezur Corridor (Huseynov, 2024).

In the wake of Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus, there is an emerging necessity to counterbalance the growing presence of Western powers in the region. The geopolitical vacuum left by Russia's relative decline has created opportunities for external actors to assert influence, which may destabilize the existing power dynamics. To mitigate this risk, closer cooperation between China and Iran becomes imperative, as both countries share an interest in curbing Western dominance in the South Caucasus.

Strengthening Sino-Iranian collaboration would not only serve to consolidate their geopolitical interests but also enhance regional stability through coordinated economic and strategic initiatives. Joint investments in infrastructure, energy projects, and security cooperation could fortify their influence, creating a multipolar balance that limits Western encroachment. This partnership would allow China to secure its economic corridors while enabling Iran to maintain its strategic relevance in regional affairs.

Moreover, the convergence of Chinese and Iranian interests in the South Caucasus could foster a new regional order, where both powers play a pivotal role in shaping political and economic dynamics. By leveraging their complementary strengths—China's economic might and Iran's geographical proximity—they can effectively counterbalance external pressures. This strategic alignment not only addresses immediate geopolitical concerns but also lays the groundwork for long-term regional influence, reinforcing their positions as key stakeholders in the evolving South Caucasus landscape.

The imposition of extensive sanctions on Iran and Russia has significantly influenced China's strategic calculations regarding its trade routes and energy corridors. Given the heightened risks associated with relying on these sanctioned economies—ranging from financial transaction limitations to potential supply chain disruptions—China seeks to diversify its transit pathways. The South Caucasus emerges as a viable alternative due to its relatively stable political environment and its capacity to serve as a secure bridge connecting Asia with Europe. This shift reflects China's broader objective to minimize geopolitical vulnerabilities in its global trade network (Avdaliani, 2023). By reducing its dependence on Iran and Russia, China aims to safeguard its economic interests against external shocks and diplomatic tensions that could jeopardize critical supply chains. The diversification of trade routes through the South Caucasus allows China to maintain the resilience of its export-driven economy, ensuring uninterrupted access to European markets. This strategy also aligns with Beijing's long-term vision of establishing flexible and secure logistic corridors that are insulated from the volatility of international sanctions regimes.

Beyond economic considerations, China's growing engagement in the South Caucasus is driven by its ambition to expand geopolitical influence and secure strategic footholds across Eurasia. The region's pivotal location offers China an opportunity to project power, enhance diplomatic leverage, and shape regional dynamics to its advantage. By deepening its presence in the South Caucasus, China seeks to establish itself as a key stakeholder in the region's political, economic, and security affairs, thereby reinforcing its status as a dominant global actor (Karagöz, 2021).

Furthermore, controlling or significantly influencing critical infrastructure and economic nodes in the South Caucasus enables China to exert indirect control over broader territorial spaces beyond

the immediate region. This approach reflects China's global strategy of using economic engagement as a tool for geopolitical influence, allowing it to consolidate power in strategically significant areas without resorting to direct military involvement. Ultimately, the South Caucasus serves as a critical platform for China to advance its regional ambitions and assert its role in shaping the future of Eurasian geopolitics.

China's primary interest in the South Caucasus is largely centered on Azerbaijan due to its strategic geographical position, robust energy resources, and role as a regional connectivity hub. Azerbaijan's vast oil and natural gas reserves, along with its well-developed infrastructure for energy exportation, make it an attractive partner for China's energy security strategy. Moreover, Azerbaijan's political stability and its pivotal location at the crossroads of major trade routes enhance its significance in China's broader geopolitical and economic ambitions. Through strengthened bilateral relations, China aims to secure reliable access to energy supplies, diversify its trade corridors, and establish a foothold in the South Caucasus that aligns with its long-term strategic objectives.

The U.S.'s Neutralizing Approach to Iranian and Chinese Influence in the Region

The United States has adopted a multi-faceted approach to curtail the growing influence of China and Iran in the South Caucasus. This strategy can be conceptualized under two key frameworks: "*Goeconomic Disruption Strategy*" and "*Military Containment Strategy*." Both are designed to limit China's economic penetration and Iran's regional maneuverability, while simultaneously reducing Russia's traditional stronghold in the region.

Through active support for Armenia, the U.S. implements its Geoeconomic Disruption Strategy, aimed at slowing down China's major infrastructural and economic projects in the region. By fostering closer political and economic ties with Armenia, including support for reforms, investments, and strategic partnerships, the U.S. seeks to create alternative economic alliances that undermine China's Belt and Road Initiative's progress. Armenia serves as a geopolitical lever to disrupt the flow of Chinese investments, logistics, and energy routes, forcing China to reconsider its regional economic plans under more complex political conditions (Akduman, 2025).

The Strategic Military Containment Strategy focuses on establishing and expanding the U.S. military presence in Armenia. This not only challenges Russia's traditional military dominance but also acts as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region. U.S. military infrastructure in Armenia facilitates advanced surveillance and intelligence operations, enabling the monitoring of both Chinese activities and Iranian military movements. This military footprint strengthens America's strategic depth in the South Caucasus, positioning it as a critical actor capable of influencing security dynamics directly from within the region (Avdaliani, 2024).

By positioning military assets and intelligence capabilities closer to Iran's borders, the U.S. aims to tighten its surveillance network over Iranian military and geopolitical activities. Armenia's geographic proximity provides a strategic vantage point for monitoring Iran's northern frontier, thus enhancing the effectiveness of U.S. counterintelligence operations. This not only serves American interests in curbing Iran's influence in the South Caucasus but also strengthens its broader Middle East security framework.

Through the dual approach of geoeconomic disruption and military containment, the U.S. is reshaping the strategic landscape of the South Caucasus. By leveraging Armenia's geopolitical position, Washington aims to simultaneously limit China's infrastructural expansion, weaken Russia's military hold, and intensify oversight of Iran's regional activities. This comprehensive strategy reflects America's broader objective of maintaining its global dominance by preventing the rise of competing powers in critical geopolitical corridors.

U.S.-Azerbaijan and U.S.-Armenian Relations after 2023

The South Caucasus is one of the key geopolitical corridors connecting Europe and Asia, often described metaphorically as the main "bridge" between the two continents. This perspective is rooted in the theoretical framework of Halford Mackinder's "Heartland Theory," which emphasizes

the strategic significance of controlling central landmasses to dominate global geopolitics. Building on Mackinder's foundational ideas, prominent strategists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger have specifically identified the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan, as a critical "geopolitical bridge" linking Europe and Asia (Olcott, 2002). This conceptualization underpins the United States' approach to the region, reflecting a deep-seated theoretical and geopolitical rationale. Within this framework, the U.S. perceives China's unregulated and unilateral presence in the South Caucasus as a direct challenge to the established balance of power. Washington views the region not merely as an economic corridor but as a pivotal strategic arena where influence over connectivity routes translates into broader geopolitical leverage. Consequently, the U.S. seeks to expand its presence and strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus to counterbalance China's growing role. This approach is not a reactionary measure but part of a long-term strategy rooted in the recognition that dominance over such key geopolitical spaces is essential for maintaining global power dynamics. The U.S. aims to ensure that no single actor, particularly China, can operate in the region without American oversight or involvement, thereby safeguarding its strategic interests in both Eurasian stability and global hegemony.

Azerbaijan's swift restoration of sovereignty over the entire Karabakh region through a one-day anti-terror operation in September 2023 came as an unexpected development for the United States, as Baku had not provided prior notification to Washington. This surprise underscored the growing strategic autonomy of Azerbaijan in regional security matters and highlighted a gap in U.S.-Azerbaijan diplomatic coordination regarding critical military operations (İme, 2023). In this regard, after the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan-U.S. relations have experienced a shift influenced by both regional dynamics and Washington's broader strategic priorities. The U.S. views Azerbaijan as a key player in the South Caucasus due to its strategic location, rich energy resources, and role as a vital corridor connecting Europe and Asia. While the region is not considered critical to U.S. vital interests like Eastern Europe or the Middle East, it remains important for geostrategic reasons, including energy security, regional stability, and countering the influence of Russia and Iran. Notably, Azerbaijan's position as a gateway to Central Asia and its proximity to key geopolitical hotspots have made it an attractive partner for the U.S. The cooperation extends to security, with Azerbaijan contributing to anti-terror operations, particularly post-9/11, and playing a role in supporting U.S.-led initiatives in Afghanistan (Yıldırım, 2012).

Moreover, the U.S. has focused on fostering economic ties and supporting reforms in Azerbaijan, aiming to strengthen governance and regional connectivity. This strategic engagement is part of Washington's effort to create a "pluralistic geopolitical space" around Russia, with the South Caucasus serving as a buffer zone to limit Moscow's and Tehran's influence. Despite fluctuations in diplomatic ties, the U.S. continues to prioritize Azerbaijan as a key partner for energy diversification, security cooperation, and geopolitical stability, reflecting a nuanced approach that balances regional partnerships with broader Eurasian strategies.

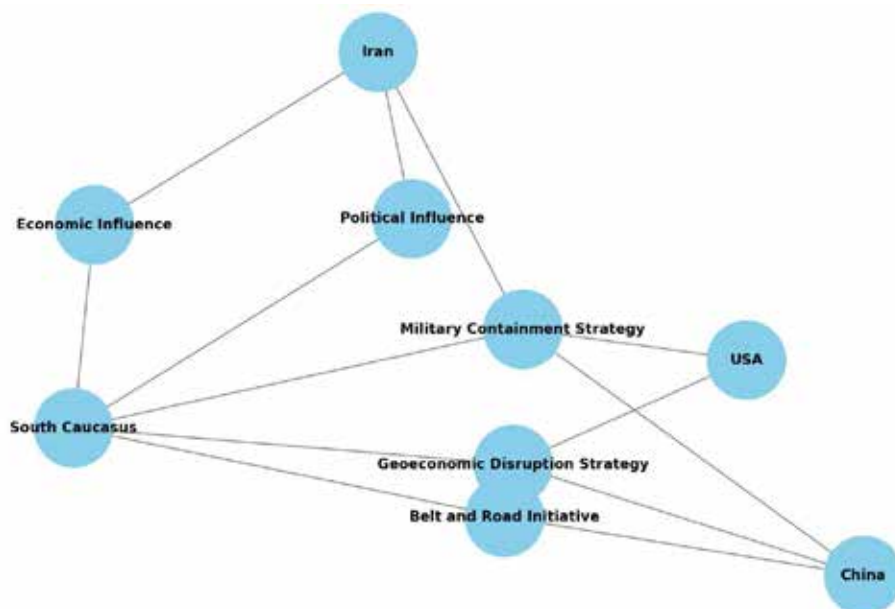
The recent developments in U.S.-Armenia relations, marked by the signing of a security guarantee document on April 5, 2024, between the Armenian Prime Minister, the U.S. Secretary of State, and the President of the European Commission, followed by the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed on January 14, 2025, in Washington between Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, reflect Washington's concrete steps to deepen its engagement in the South Caucasus. These agreements signify a shift towards a more robust U.S.-Armenia strategic alignment, which has raised concerns in Azerbaijan. Baku perceives these developments as potentially destabilizing for the regional balance of power, viewing the growing U.S.-Armenia cooperation as a move that could undermine Azerbaijan's security interests and influence in the region (Azərbaycan Respublikası XİN, 2024). This situation has led to growing dissatisfaction within Azerbaijani political circles, as it challenges the existing geopolitical dynamics following the Second Karabakh War.

Results and Discussion. As a result of our research, the U.S. aims to counter China's economic expansion in the south caucasus through strategic partnerships with Armenia: the United States actively supports Armenia to disrupt China's growing economic footprint in the South Caucasus. By fostering political and economic reforms, investing in infrastructure, and formalizing strategic agreements like the 2025 Strategic Partnership Agreement, the U.S. creates alternative economic alliances that challenge China's influence. This approach aims to undermine China's Belt and Road Initiative, limiting Beijing's control over critical trade and energy routes in the region. The U.S. leverages Armenia as a geopolitical anchor to complicate China's regional ambitions.

China seeks to establish long-term geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus through economic infrastructure: China's engagement in the South Caucasus extends beyond economic interests, reflecting a broader strategy to secure a lasting geopolitical presence. The focus on key infrastructure projects, such as enhancing regional connectivity through Azerbaijan, serves not only trade purposes but also as a means to project diplomatic and political influence. By controlling strategic economic nodes, China indirectly asserts power over the region, shaping its political dynamics without resorting to direct military involvement.

Azerbaijan's growing strategic autonomy challenges U.S. influence in regional security dynamics. Azerbaijan's swift restoration of sovereignty over Karabakh in 2023 without prior consultation with the U.S. highlights Baku's increasing independence in regional security affairs. This event revealed gaps in U.S.-Azerbaijan diplomatic coordination and signaled Azerbaijan's ability to pursue its security objectives without external approval. As Azerbaijan strengthens its position as a regional power, it may continue to act unilaterally, complicating U.S. efforts to maintain strategic influence in the South Caucasus.

U.S. military presence in Armenia serves dual purposes: limiting Russia's influence and enhancing surveillance over Iran. The U.S. military's expansion in Armenia is not solely aimed at countering Russia's dominance but also functions as a strategic platform for monitoring Iranian activities. Armenia's geographical proximity to Iran provides an advantageous position for U.S. intelligence



**Figure 1. Network Model of Geopolitical Influence in the South Caucasus:
U.S. vs. Sino-Iranian cooperation**

operations, enhancing its ability to oversee military movements and regional security threats. This dual-purpose strategy strengthens U.S. leverage in both the South Caucasus and the broader Middle Eastern security landscape.

Sino-Iranian cooperation in the South Caucasus represents a coordinated effort to counterbalance Western influence: the growing alignment between China and Iran in the South Caucasus is not coincidental but reflects a deliberate strategy to limit Western, particularly U.S., dominance in the region. Their joint investments in infrastructure, energy, and security cooperation create a multipolar environment that challenges the traditional influence of Western powers. This collaboration enables both nations to consolidate their geopolitical interests, presenting a unified front against U.S.-led strategic initiatives in the region.

Results of the study can be illustrated with a network model as follows (Figure 1).

The network model visually illustrates the complex geopolitical dynamics shaping the South Caucasus, highlighting the interactions between key regional and global actors. Iran exerts its influence through two main channels: Political Influence and Economic Influence, both of which directly affect the South Caucasus, emphasizing Iran's traditional role in regional affairs. China's presence is concentrated around the Belt and Road Initiative, which serves as a strategic economic corridor facilitating Beijing's long-term goal of establishing secure trade routes across Eurasia. In contrast, the United States employs a dual-strategy approach: the *Goeconomic Disruption Strategy*, targeting China's economic ambitions, and the *Military Containment Strategy*, aimed at both Iran and China while simultaneously projecting influence over the South Caucasus. Notably, both U.S. strategies have direct pathways to the South Caucasus, reflecting Washington's intent to maintain regional stability while curbing the growing influence of its rivals. This interconnected web of influences and counter-strategies highlights the South Caucasus as a pivotal geopolitical arena where economic interests, military strategies, and political agendas of major powers converge, making it a critical battleground in the broader context of global power competition.

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