

New Developments in the Security Situation in the Caucasus and China's Concerns

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Abstract: *Since the 1990s, the development of the Caucasus countries and the regional security situation have undergone profound changes. In this new phase of independent development, the Caucasus countries face complex challenges, particularly persistent security issues that hinder a smooth transition. China's multi-layered and comprehensive foreign policy framework facilitates targeted interactions with various nations. As an extension of the Eurasian subregion and Central Asia, the Caucasus has emerged as an important partner within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative in recent years, leading to increasingly close relations between China and the Caucasus countries. However, it is important to note that regional security concerns and potential shifts in the security landscape remain challenges that could affect the progress of cooperation. At this stage, effectively addressing regional security challenges while promoting practical cooperation is a key issue for China's diplomacy. This approach is also crucial for further enhancing China's future relations and cooperation with the Caucasus countries.*

Keywords: *Caucasus region, security, China-Caucasus relations, Chinese foreign policy*

China adheres to its fundamental policy of openness and firmly pursues a strategy of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation.¹ China's multi-layered and comprehensive foreign policy framework facilitates targeted interactions with various nations. Notably, neighboring countries and those in the Global South², which are increasingly representative of multipolarity, have become central to China's efforts to develop global partnerships and foster mechanisms for the "community of shared destiny"³. In recent years, continued cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative⁴ framework has provided both a foundation and substantive content for China's diplomatic landscape, forging connections with partners across a broader geographic scope. The Caucasus,

¹ 中华人民共和国外交部. (2024年3月28日). 《中国外交政策》。
https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zcwj_674915/200608/t20060824_9868937.shtml

² 求是网. (2024年7月15日). 《携手共建更加开放包容的“全球南方”》。
http://www.qstheory.cn/qshy/jx/2024-07/05/c_1130175438.htm

³ 《携手构建合作共赢新伙伴，同心打造人类命运共同体》，人民网，2015年9月29日，
<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0104/c416126-29746010.html>

⁴ 《共建“一带一路”：构建人类命运共同体的重大实践》，中华人民共和国外交部，2023年10月10日，
https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zcwj_674915/202310/t20231010_11158751.shtml

as a subregion within the broader Eurasian space and an extension of Central Asia, has emerged as a focal point in China's foreign relations and economic activities. Given this context, the Caucasus's role within China's diplomatic framework, alongside security issues closely tied to practical cooperation, has become a key area of focus.⁵

When examining the Caucasus countries, notable differences emerge in both their historical trajectories and specific conditions since independence. Over the past three decades, each country has sought to mobilize resources to achieve its strategic goals. For the Caucasus countries in transition, the ultimate objective is to establish a coherent political identity and foster national development, guiding the state, society, and people toward material advancement, and achieving independence and autonomy in both domestic and foreign affairs. However, for these smaller nations with relatively limited resources, achieving such transformation and exerting a significant role in the regional and international arenas presents substantial challenges. Currently, beyond contending with persistent "chronic issues" of regional security and obstacles to smooth transition,⁶ the Caucasus countries must independently navigate numerous challenges that may arise in the context of globalization. In recent years, internal issues have intensified, influenced by factors such as the pandemic; the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and increasingly complex regional security dynamics. Security concerns involving multiple actors remain volatile, placing these countries under dual pressures to manage crises while ensuring the overall stability and development. Identifying a viable path forward is an urgent priority.

I. Persistent Risks in the Regional Security Dilemma

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue remains the core factor in the ongoing tense relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, making it crucial to analyze both countries' positions within a shared framework when evaluating regional security situation. The post-Nagorno-Karabakh standoff remains far

⁵ 侯艾君：《中国在外高加索地区的安全风险及其规避》，《国际安全研究》2019年第2期，第69页。

⁶ Thomas de Waal. (2013). "The Search for Security in the Caucasus." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2013/04/the-search-for-security-in-the-caucasus?lang=en>

from achieving lasting security in the region, and significant unresolved issues persist between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The conflict that reignited in September 2020, commonly referred to as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, once again brought Armenia and Azerbaijan into direct confrontation over the "Nagorno-Karabakh issue", drawing notable attention both regionally and internationally. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the chaotic "separation" process—marked by regional ethnic tensions, long-standing disputes, as well as aspirations tied to the establishment of independent states—fueled significant disorder. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, originating in the early 1990s, has since been marked by fluctuating tensions and periodic clashes. Despite numerous dialogues and coordination mechanisms, the issue remains unresolved, with decades of efforts failing to yield a solution acceptable to all parties. Although armed conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh ceased after September 2023, hostile tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan endure. While the intensity of the regional security threats may decrease, the underlying factors shaping the security landscape have not fundamentally changed.

In academia, the "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" is typically categorized as a "frozen conflict" within the former Soviet space. Along with the "Abkhazian issue", "South Ossetian issue" and the "Transnistrian issue", it has become a focal point of scholarly attention. These conflicts are often discussed not only within the fields of Russian, Soviet, and Eurasian studies but also through the specialized lenses of political science, sociology, and history.⁷ Theoretical analyses provide insights into the multifaceted nature of these issues. However, the logic and decision-making processes behind the political behaviors that shape real-world situations frequently diverge from academic theories, influenced by less quantifiable factors such as leaders' cognition, emotions, and the signaling games between involved parties.

In recent years, the frozen state of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been disrupted, largely driven by shifts in regional and external power dynamics. The timing of the renewed conflict and the strategic objectives of the parties currently

⁷ de Waal, T., & von Twickel, N. (2020). Beyond Frozen Conflict: Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe. In M. Emerson (Ed.), Center for European Policy Studies. Kazantsev, A. A., et al. (2020). "Russia's Policy in the 'Frozen Conflicts' of the Post-Soviet Space: From Ethno-Politics to Geopolitics." *Caucasus Survey*, 8(2), 142–162.

embroiled in it warrant deeper investigation. Moreover, the drastic change in this "frozen conflict" at a specific point in time merely reflects prior security conditions. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War does not signify an immediate or substantive change in the region's security issues or the long-standing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At this juncture, new factors have emerged in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict that must be carefully considered when re-evaluating regional security dynamics.

The rationale for providing only a factual update on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations stems from the conflict's current state of apparent calm, which is, in reality, a period of flux. While external observers may interpret this thawing as a resolution of past contradictions and confrontations, the truth is that this perceived easing has introduced further complexities regarding the future trajectory of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations.⁸ The persistence and intricacy of these tensions make achieving a definitive settlement particularly challenging at this stage. Nonetheless, new developments in the situation, along with the signals and strategies of the involved parties, are crucial for understanding the future security landscape of the region.

II. Political Maturity and Regional Security Amidst Transition

Over the past 30 years of independence, post-Soviet states have entered a new phase of national transformation, with their political maturity continuously tested amid a complex regional landscape. For instance, Georgia, unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, which remain locked in hostility over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, has not experienced significant upheaval in recent years. Even after the resurgence of the Ukraine crisis in 2022, Georgia's relative stability in the South Caucasus has garnered attention. However, internally, the ongoing tension between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition continues to simmer, with the party's control over domestic affairs becoming a key point of contention regarding the country's future political direction and foreign strategy.

⁸ Poghosyan, B. (n.d.). "Is Azerbaijan Interested in Peace?" APRI. <https://apri.institute/is-azerbaijan-interested-in-peace/>

Although Georgia shares many similarities with Ukraine and Moldova, its response to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has highlighted distinct differences. Observers have noted that policies of the ruling Georgian Dream party do not fully align with the Euro-Atlantic vision, particularly its refusal to open a "second front"⁹ against Russia, reflecting a cautious approach to avoid further entanglement. Despite pro-Ukraine rallies and prolonged standoffs over the "foreign agent law", the Georgian government ultimately proceeded with its legislative agenda as planned. Compared to the heightened external tensions stemming from the Ukraine issue, Georgia's measured political decisions have largely preserved the country's stability during this period. However, Georgia's limited engagement between both Russia and the West has drawn criticism from pro-European segments of society, who perceive the government's stance on Ukraine and EU integration as inadequate.¹⁰

Georgia's contemporary political trajectory reflects a period of rapid alignment with the West, driven by reform policies that have brought tangible benefits to its citizens and fostered the widespread adoption of European values.¹¹ However, for post-Soviet states like Georgia, geographic and historical constraints pose significant challenges to national transformation. Careful navigation of these challenges is essential, as missteps could lead to severe security risks. Georgia's "conservative" approach in recent years should not be hastily judged; it is informed by the strategic miscalculations and significant losses of the conflict with Russia in 2008, as well as by the country's current political context. These external complexities serve as a test of Georgia's political maturity during its transition.

Evaluations of Georgia's recent policies vary; however, from the perspective of national transformation and political development, the country's ability to defuse social tensions and resist external interference through mature political decision-making reflects a representative autonomous choice

⁹ "Georgian PM says idea of 'second front' comes from Ukraine's high ranking officials", Agende.ge, 19 July 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/2810#gsc.tab=0>

¹⁰ "From Elections to Elections: Transformation of the Georgian Ruling Party 'Georgian Dream'", Georgian Institute of Politics, October 17, 2024, <https://gip.ge/publication-post/from-elections-to-elections-transformation-of-the-georgian-ruling-political-party-georgian-dream/>

¹¹ "Georgia's European Union Integration Roadmap", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://mfa.gov.ge/en/european-union/946166-saqartvelos-evrokavshirshi-integratsiis-saqzao-ruka>

among post-Soviet states today. In the complex Eurasian environment, post-Soviet states like Georgia face significant risks when choosing between ideologies¹² or blindly following group policies in foreign affairs, particularly given the current state of their state structures and political systems. For countries in the Caucasus, functioning as hubs and crossroads, a mature political system and effective policy-making mechanisms are critical to promoting and achieving regional security. Nevertheless, the challenges these states face also test the political maturity of their transitions, necessitating case-by-case analysis. Overall, the political maturity accumulated over more than three decades of transition in post-Soviet states is now manifesting in their crisis management capabilities and in asserting political agency, which are key aspects of their current phase of development.

III. The Latest Phase of Bilateral Interactions and China's Concerns

Since the reform and opening-up, China's foreign relations have undergone considerable development, resulting in a foreign policy that reflects its national conditions. In light of significant and rapid changes in the international landscape, China remains committed to its fundamental policy of openness. It adheres to a strategy of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, promotes the construction of a new type of international relations, deepens and expands global partnerships based on equality, openness, and cooperation, and is dedicated to increasing the convergence of interests with other countries.¹³ Among the various groups of countries, Eurasian nations are notably significant due to the dramatic changes that occurred in the early 1990s. During that time, China established diplomatic relations with the newly independent countries in the post-Soviet space, enhancing and refining its foreign relations mechanisms. Although bilateral relations between China and these countries are still relatively young, the foundational ties and the strategic importance of these countries as neighboring partners have resulted in significant advancements in their

¹² "Europe or Russia? For Georgians, the Choice isn't so Simple", Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-russia-georgia-choice-not-simple-parliamentary-election-2024-tbilisi-georgian-dream-demonstration/>

¹³ 《中国外交政策》，中华人民共和国外交部，2024年3月28日，https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zcwj_674915/200608/t20060824_9868937.shtml

development.¹⁴ In recent years, China's partnerships with Central Asian countries have diversified and deepened through various multilateral platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the China-Central Asia Mechanism.¹⁵ These platforms have facilitated comprehensive development and strengthened the bonds between China and the Eurasian region.

China's engagement with the Caucasus countries has unique features compared to its relationships with Central Asian countries. Since their independence in the early 1990s, the Caucasus, as a crucial Eurasian subregion, has undergone substantial security and strategic transformations. China acknowledges the significance of cultivating relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and the implementation of the BRI has elevated the status of the Caucasus within China's foreign policy.

The South Caucasus countries—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—have aligned with the BRI, leveraging cooperative frameworks to advance economic and trade relations with China. Bilateral relations have seen notable progress: in July 2023, China and Georgia formalized their strategic partnership through a Joint Declaration¹⁶, followed by China and Azerbaijan establishing a strategic partnership in July 2024¹⁷. China's diplomatic relations with Armenia have also evolved positively, with Armenian political forces strongly supporting the enhancement of bilateral cooperation.¹⁸ Armenia's commitment to deepening ties with China signals promising prospects for advancing bilateral relations in the region.

With the advancement of the BRI and its practical cooperations, China's relationship with the Caucasus countries

¹⁴ 《孙壮志：欧亚区域秩序变革与中国——中亚关系》，中国社会科学网，2024年2月23日，http://www.cssn.cn/ztzl/ztzl_skwzq/skyzdxmjxs/zdxmjxs_llqs/202402/t20240223_5734619.shtml

¹⁵ 《中国-中亚机制》，中华人民共和国外交部，2024年4月，https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/zqzyjz/jbqk_688960/

¹⁶ "Full text: Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and Georgia on Establishing a Strategic Partnership", Xinhuanet.com., July 31, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230731/394226ab984a4cfca3a8901c14583d5a/c.html>

¹⁷ "Joint Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the People's Republic of China on the establishment of a strategic partnership was adopted in Astana", President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, July 3, 2024, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66389>

¹⁸ 《中国同亚美尼亚关系》，国家国际发展合作署，<http://www.cidca.gov.cn/gjhdq/yz/ymny2.htm>

has undergone significant positive transformations, and these ties are expected to strengthen further.¹⁹ However, a key determinant of the resilience and sustainability of these bilateral relations will be the region's security and stability. Given the complex and often volatile security dynamics in the Caucasus, a stable and secure environment is essential for the continued success and deepening of cooperation within the BRI framework.

For Caucasus countries, achieving security and development alongside robust security guarantee is imperative. Yet, security challenges in the region persist, turning strategic advantages into a complex web of factors that hinder national development agendas.²⁰ At this juncture, safeguarding multipolarity and an equitable, open international environment is vital. China recognizes the Caucasus as a crucial BRI node and views potential cooperation with the region optimistically. To foster enduring partnerships, China emphasizes the need for a secure and stable cooperative environment, the reinforcement of its image as a reliable partner, and the promotion of mutual understanding among local governments, enterprises, and the public on the mutually beneficial nature of cooperation. These efforts are pivotal to securing and advancing China's relationships with the Caucasus region at present and in the future.

Conclusion

In recent years, the relations between China and the Caucasus countries have experienced notable and rapid growth, largely driven by the cooperation within the BRI framework. This cooperation aligns closely with the shared interests and development goals of both China and the Caucasus countries, becoming the foundation of their relations. Progress in various projects reflects positive outcomes, yet the sustainability of these partnerships hinges on a stable regional environment. Effective communication at both strategic and operational levels remains crucial for fostering robust and lasting cooperation.

¹⁹ 《中国与格鲁吉亚经贸合作走深走实》，中国一带一路网，2023年12月29日，<https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0LJUBBC9.html>

²⁰ "Shifting Conflict and Security Dynamics in the Caucasus: The Role of Regional Powers", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 1, 2016, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/shifting-conflict-and-security-dynamics-caucasus-role-regional-powers>

The evolving relationship indicates a shift, as the region's development agenda increasingly progresses beyond security-related constraints. With heightened demand for practical development and international cooperation, Caucasus countries are asserting a higher-level autonomy after decades of transformation. China's diplomatic strategy now emphasizes advancing mutual growth and regional stability through expanded cooperation, reinforcing its commitment to supporting the development goals of the Caucasus countries while contributing to a secure environment for long-term collaboration.

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