

# Omens for the South Caucasus in the 2024 US Presidential Election

Written by Intigam Mamedov

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INTIGAM MAMEDOV, AUG 19 2024

The debates around the coming US election mainly focus on its domestic implications or consequences for big issues in global politics, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, NATO's future, and the China-Taiwan or Palestine-Israel conflicts. However, the outcome of the US election may influence a variety of other vulnerable areas. A case in point is the South Caucasus, with its currently transforming order, internal tensions, and a number of foreign interests involved. The latest survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre shows wide partisan gaps in determining the US top foreign policy priorities. The public attitude of Americans is divided over issues like strengthening NATO and the UN, promoting human rights abroad and maintaining US military advantage. Similarly, conflicting perceptions can be observed among US politicians. As Jordan Tama argues, the increased polarisation and collapse of the consensus on liberal internationalism mean a bipartisan compact on America's global role is unlikely to happen.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus (also referred to as Transcaucasus) is largely comprised of today's nation-states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The US strategy in the South Caucasus has gone through different stages. At the beginning of the 1990s, any aspirations about expanding the US reach in the region were hampered by ethnic conflicts, the rise of nationalist forces and the generally destabilised political environment in the three Transcaucasian states. From the early 2000s, US expectations in the region were given impetus by some efforts for democratic transition in Georgia, resulted in the so-called Rose Revolution. Later, the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 made further expansion of Western institutions and values difficult. Rumer et al. write that since that moment, US politics there became declaratory with diminished expectations. Until now, the US attitude towards the Transcaucasus was indeed inertial. Though, the transition of power in Armenia in 2018, the new regional order after the 2020 Karabakh war and further escalations in 2022-2023 might have made the US decision-makers reconsider their interests and expectations.

Current US goals in the region are presented in the latest integrated country strategies published in the spring of 2022 by the US Department of State. In Armenia, Washington pursues three main goals. First, it aims at strengthening democratic institutions, combating corruption and protecting human rights. Secondly, the US seeks to promote trade, investment, and energy cooperation in the country. In particular, the objectives are to improve competitiveness, reduce barriers in trade and investment and increase Armenia's energy and water security. Thirdly, the US builds partnerships to address global and regional threats, advancing reconciliation efforts, supporting defence sector reforms and strengthening Armenia's capacity to conduct peacekeeping operations and respond to natural and man-made disasters.

In Azerbaijan, the US wants to bolster Baku's contribution to regional and international peace. Washington tries to support cooperation and reconciliation efforts and strengthen Baku's capabilities to counter domestic and transnational security threats. The country's strategy also encourages Azerbaijan to diversify its economy and build closer ties with the United States. The key objectives are to support the Southern Gas Corridor and European energy security, attract US direct investment, achieve Azerbaijan's commitment to a green economy and its involvement in independent and Western-led economic and environmental initiatives. Washington also aims to stimulate civil society institutions and become a more visible partner of Azerbaijan by providing a better understanding of United States culture and values. The US is also interested in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic and regional integration and in increasing its

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capability to address domestic and global threats. Similar to the two neighbouring countries, it is expected of Georgia to strengthen democracy, rule of law and anti-corruption efforts, so much essential for the Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations. In the economic area, the US seeks to foster a transparent market-based economy open to US investment, diversified trade and inclusive, higher-value employment.

A few things are clearly observed here. In the South Caucasus, the US focuses on the regional stability and normalisation of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, spurring peace as a fundamental condition for unlocking regional potential in the economy. Then, it considers Georgia's integration with the West more promising and feasible. Lastly, the US recognises the importance of having Azerbaijan as an economic partner, taking into account its role in regional transit projects and energy supply capability.

There are several factors in 2024 that will impact the short and long-term future of the region. First, Armenia and Azerbaijan are working on a peace agreement. It seems that they are now closer to the peace deal than ever. There are still three sticking points in reaching this deal, such as the demarcation of borders, international guarantees and dispute resolution mechanisms, and opening the Zangezur Corridor – a transit route connecting Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan through Armenia's territory. The first two issues are not insoluble and can be settled with the diplomatic efforts and political will of the parties. In contrast, the third point regarding transportation infrastructure and connectivity presents the most complicated problem. The 9<sup>th</sup> provision of the 2020 Trilateral Statement (armistice agreement that ended the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War) states that “all economic and transport links in the region shall be unblocked”, and Armenia shall guarantee transport communication between Azerbaijan's western regions and Nakhichevan to organize the movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo. However, the two countries have opposite views and interpretations of this provision, and Armenia does not want its territory to be used for the international corridor controlled by Baku. This issue is often considered a threat of further escalation. Such concerns are shared not only in Armenia but also in Iran, presenting them as a risk for its sole land border with Armenia and a relevant trade route.

Apart from the obstacles to the peace deal, there are equally important issues deserving attention. Such issues include demining vast territories in Nagorno-Karabakh, exchanging prisoners of war, reintegrating Karabakh Armenians willing to return to their homes, restoring the cultural heritage, constructing narratives of peace between the two nations, and implementing the common environmental policy of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within the Caspian-Caucasian bioregion.

Second, Georgia is expecting parliamentary elections in late October 2024, where the Georgian Dream – the Russia-friendly ruling party – will try to maintain power. The results of these elections will certainly impact the future of EU-Georgia relations and generally determine the country's foreign policy direction for the following four years. But even if (it is doubtful) the newly elected parliament will, in its majority, consist of pro-Western opposition, there are factors not favouring strengthening cooperation with the West. The new geopolitical reality established without any salient involvement of any Western state or institution diminished their role and potential power in the region. Georgian Dream party and its pro-Russian stance are not the only problems in Georgia's way toward Euro-Atlantic integration. This was brilliantly illustrated by Kornely Kakachia. On the one hand, Georgia witnesses the evolving regional security architecture that excludes Western partners. On the other hand, Russian regional presence is perceived as an existential threat to Georgian sovereignty. Eugene Kogan explains that today's Tbilisi has come to a political impasse. It has no allies ready to protect Georgia in case of any military conflict. Some of its territories were annexed in 2008 and remain under Russian strategic control. The society is politically divided, and anti-Western rhetoric used by the ruling party challenges its relations with the EU.

Third, the uncertainty of the current moment stems from the increasing uncertainty of the international political context. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resulted in the changing influence of Moscow in the South Caucasus. It now has the lowest level of relations with Armenia – formerly the main ally in the region. Erevan has frozen its relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, ratified the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute, and is actively looking to diversify its security partners. The alliance between Azerbaijan and Türkiye has become the major power in the region. Türkiye significantly intensified the strategic and military cooperation with Baku. In a post-war order of 2024, Ankara's priorities are regional peace and connectivity. It may consider the

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decreasing level of Russia's power in the region as a window of opportunity to establish a stable security architecture, as well as an inclusive trade and economic system connected to other logistic programs, such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. Ankara sought to build a regional mechanism of cooperation. In the 2000s, it initiated the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. Then, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan put forward the "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation in 2020, which endeavoured to undermine the West's influence in the South Caucasus by restricting the regional cooperation to Russia, Türkiye and Iran plus Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia refused to participate in this format, and it appeared to be just another failure to create an inclusive regional cooperation mechanism, either with or without the West.

Russia is trying to reshape its policy in Transcaucasia according to new geopolitical reality and within the ongoing rivalry with the West. Even though it is losing direct control and power over the region, the exclusion of the Western reach there can be considered a victory for Moscow. The absence of Russia's current strategic vision on the South Caucasus makes it take a reactive approach, ready to adapt to any order that is not dependent on the West. As Azizi and Isachenko rightly emphasise, "a 'less Russia, more Turkey' dynamic heightens Tehran's apprehensions towards Ankara". Iran is concerned about the Zangezur Corridor, which primarily empowers Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's positions and threatens to complicate Tehran's access to Armenia and isolate it from global trade routes. Besides, Iran is frustrated by deepening of Azerbaijan-Israeli military and economic relations. At the same time, the decision to construct the Aras corridor connecting Azerbaijan's mainland and its exclave through Iranian territory illustrates the improvement of ties with Baku and the cooling of relations with Erevan. It can be explained as Tehran's attempt to adapt to the changing regional order and benefit from where it can. However, it is also caused by Armenia's strive to involve Western states in regional politics.

A new regional order in the South Caucasus established after Azerbaijan regained its sovereign territory brings changing power dynamics and creates a vital opportunity either for peace, integration, and prosperity or for a new wave of geopolitical rivalry. Too many essential things are on the agenda today. There is still no consent over some security and economic issues. And there is no regional platform representing the three states that is able to provide quick and working solutions. Each of the three Transcaucasian countries or those neighbouring states like Türkiye, Iran and Russia are following the US election intrigue. So, the outcome of the US election not only affects American foreign policy itself but probably impacts the conduct of the regional actors. Below are a few observations made in this field.

Georgia's consistent efforts to join the European Union and NATO are now at risk because of the adoption of authoritarian law on foreign influence. Additionally, the prospects of Trump being re-elected in the US, in fact, make Tbilisi accurately align its politics with Russia. Undoubtedly, pro-Western forces in Georgia prefer that Democrats win the election. But in any case, whether Trump or Harris will take the White House, the future of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration is questionable if the ruling party will keep power and continue its political line. The current Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, holds a pro-Republican stance and reproduces narratives about the "global war party" or "liberal fascism". Kobakhidze is not the only leader in the region who supports Trump's coming to power.

In July 2024, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev expressed his preference to work with Trump and the US Republican administration. Building a new security order and positioning itself as a rising middle power, Azerbaijan needs to minimise foreign interference in the South Caucasus. From this perspective, Trump's "America first" agenda and the proposed foreign-policy isolationism of the US play in favour of Baku's interests. A clear domestic focus of the 2024 Republican party platform means Armenia has to be careful when counting on US support in the next four years. It was during Trump's previous presidency when Azerbaijan defeated separatists and took back lands occupied by Armenia. And it was Trump who rejected to recognise the Armenian 'genocide' by the late Ottoman empire. The Republican non-interventionist stance is not ubiquitous. Some issues, such as the support of Israel, are still on Trump's agenda. Though the South Caucasus is obviously of less value for Republicans.

Opposite to this, in her social media, Harris openly declared that she considers the mass killings of Armenians as 'genocide'. Never being totally pro-Armenian, she collaborated with Armenian lobbyists and supported some of their initiatives during her work in the US Senate. The Armenian National Committee of America now pressures Harris to promise sanctioning Azerbaijan and ensuring safe return of Armenians to Nagorno-Karabakh in order to attract

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Armenian American voters. Democrats, in general, are more focused on foreign affairs and the growing US footprint worldwide. But this assumption doesn't necessarily mean that if Kamala Harris wins the presidential election, she will substantially increase the US reach in the South Caucasus. The foreign policy doctrine of the Democrats is not clear yet, and it is a question of how Kamala Harris will handle Transcaucasia in such a complicated period. We may expect the Democrats to continue Biden's trajectory and concentrate on the Middle East, Russia-Ukraine war and East Asia. Thus, the attention to the South Caucasus depends on which role the emerging regional order will play in the changing global security architecture. Harris's administration will unlikely be satisfied with increased Russian or Iranian control over the region. So, a containment policy may form a central model.

There is a widespread opinion that the peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan may happen in November this year during the COP29 summit hosted by Baku – if the US intensifies the negotiations. Such a breakthrough is beneficial for both parties and the US, which may get a mediator role. However, it is contentious whether such a scenario is feasible. It requires strong political will and explicit agreement on the abovementioned sticking points. What is more important is that Azerbaijan does not need to rush and make unwanted concessions – especially taking into account the chances of Trump being re-elected and a subsequent decrease in US participation in regional affairs. But if the peace deal happens in November, it would hopefully launch a new era of cooperation, lasting peace and stability.

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