



## The Foreign Policy of Donald Trump's Administration in Transcaucasia

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### Abstract

Transcaucasia is a politically complicated region. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have different foreign policy vectors, strategies, and relations with the United States. This paper provides a detailed analysis of the main political processes in Transcaucasia during the presidency of Donald Trump. The research is focused primarily on the development of bilateral relations of the United States with the countries of Transcaucasia in three directions: military cooperation, economic relations, and promotion of democracy. We examine the role and the interests of the United States in Transcaucasia and the priorities of the foreign policy of Trump's administration there. The role of Russia is significant in the region as well, especially after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Russian Federation is against losing its dominance there and the expansion of NATO in Transcaucasia. It tries to deepen the authoritarian regime in the region and keep it under its control. The research findings show clearly the importance of cooperation and partnership between this complicated region and the United States, which can be a much better guarantor of stability, development, and democratic progress in Transcaucasia.

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**Keywords:** Politics, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, cooperation

## **Introduction**

The interest of the United States of America in Transcaucasia has become higher since the collapse of the USSR. The post-soviet countries Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia attracted the attention of America due to their oil and gas potential, as well as a geostrategic position near important to Washington Russia, Iran, Southwest Asia, as well as the Black and the Caspian Seas (Bekiarova, 2019).

By developing cooperation in the economic and military field with the countries of the South Caucasus, the United States solves the problems of ensuring energy security, support for the operation in the Afghanistan camp, and the fight against terrorism. An integral part of the US foreign policy is the "promotion of democracy" and the protection of human rights. For these purposes, the US uses political-diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation. The main geopolitical task of Washington is to weaken the influence of Russia and Iran in the region. Consistent work is being done to support these countries to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political developments and implications for U.S. interests, 2010).

Democratic or Republican administrations continue intrusive policies in the region. However, the priorities change: it is given to either economic interaction, military cooperation, or democratization programs.

## **Methods**

The following research methods have been used: the method of the analysis of the information published in different scientific journals and on the official websites. The comparative analysis of some documents and activities is also used as a research method. The approaches to textual analysis include content analysis, argumentation analysis, and the qualitative analysis of ideas in the content. The implication, foreign policy, interests, conflicts, predictions, etc. are included in the object of study.

## **Cooperation in the military field**

The Pentagon supported the countries of the South Caucasus to continue reforms of the national armed forces, military education, and training systems to bring them closer to NATO standards. Together with the Americans, these countries hold conferences, training to work out the coordination of interaction between the armed forces and conducting anti-terrorist and anti-drug campaigns. Armenian, Azerbaijani, and the largest Georgian contingents take part in NATO missions to train and assist Afghan government forces.

US-Georgia military cooperation began in the late 1990s. In 2009, the Charter of Strategic Partnership was signed, which, among other things,

provides for building up cooperation in the areas of security and defense. (U.S. Embassy in Georgia: Memorandum on Deepening the Defense and Security Partnership Between the United States of America and Georgia (July 6), 2016)

In the spring of 2018, a special program was launched to train nine battalions of the Georgian Defense Forces by the Americans. In 2019, a three-year security cooperation agreement was signed aimed at reforming and improving the combat capability of the Georgian army (State Security Service of Georgia, n.d.).

Under Trump's administration, military-technical cooperation between the United States and Georgia began to increase. In 2018, the Americans sold Javelin portable anti-tank missile systems, M-240 machine guns, and Stinger anti-aircraft missile systems to Georgia.

Since 2011, training "Agile Spirit" has been held in Georgia with the participation of the United States and NATO countries to "improve the compatibility of the standards of the defense forces of Georgia and NATO, as well as the preparation of the Georgian military for participation in international peacekeeping operations." In 2020, the United States allocated \$132 million in financial assistance to Georgia, of which \$42 million went to the military sector. At the same time, the increase in allocations for military spending compared to 2019 amounted to \$ 5 million.

The Americans are involved in the construction of military infrastructure in Azerbaijan. Under the auspices of the State Department and the Pentagon, significant allocations are made to Azerbaijan through the educational programs "Foreign Military Funding" and "International Military Education and Training" (Europe and Eurasia, 2009-2017).

During the presidency of Donald Trump, the cooperation with Baku in the military field was focused on strengthening the southern border of Azerbaijan with Iran. This strategy provided the construction of modern infrastructure, the installation of control and tracking systems, and transport support for the Azerbaijani border guards. The funding was part of the Pentagon's "Strengthening Partner Capabilities" program and amounted to 2018 and 2019 (more than 100 million dollars).

Military cooperation between the United States and Armenia is restricted. The US helps Armenia to increase the capability of the army, mostly for participation in peacekeeping operations, the training of military medical specialists, etc. Armenian military is allowed to participate in coalition peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and other countries. The Trump administration had several attempts to deepen the military-strategic relations with Armenia, however, the issue was only discussed but not realized.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war which lasted around six weeks finally ended on the tenth of November 2020 with a ceasefire supported by the Russian Federation (Il'inyh, 2021).

Aside from the fact that Turkey provided extensive support to Azerbaijan to win the war, it is important to understand its main short-term goal: the opening of an access route to Azerbaijan and Central Asia through Meghri, which will shorten the route for shipping goods and allow for the expansion of Turkish economic influence over Armenia itself (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political developments and implications for U.S. interests, 2010).

Under the agreement, Azerbaijan now again controls the seven districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh that Armenian forces had held since the previous war. The rest of the territory is patrolled by a Russian peacekeeping force but is still governed by self-proclaimed local authorities.

“America’s lack of interest in Nagorno-Karabakh was first flagged in August 2017 when the US-appointed its new representative to the Minsk Group, Andrew Schofer, but did not grant him ambassador status – putting him at a lower rank than his French and Russian counterparts” (Borger 2020). Under the Trump administration, the US has taken a back seat on many major international issues, compared to previous administrations, particularly when it affects the Russian sphere of influence (Borger, 2020).

The Trump administration was not actively involved to stop the conflict that escalated in 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh. The reason for this inactivity was the final stage of the presidential campaign in the United States (Kasim, 2012).

### **Supporting democratic development**

In 2000 in the region, the representation of various American non-governmental organizations and foundations has significantly expanded, the most active of which were the Soros Foundation, the Partnership Foundation, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican University, Freedom House, and others. Together with American business and military instructors from the United States, the task of strengthening the American presence and influencing the public opinion of three republics located in the South Caucasus was solved.

During this period, there was also a significant increase in funding for American and local non-governmental actors operating in the Transcaucasia, pro-Western structures of civil society, an increase in the number of democratization programs, as well as an increase in the number of various educational and cultural exchanges.

In particular, the Americans achieved the greatest success in the field of democratization of the South Caucasus countries mostly in Georgia. As a

result of the “Rose revolution” of 2003, pro-American opposition forces led by M. Saakashvili came to power in the republic. Tbilisi was declared an important partner of Washington and “the best democracy in the region.” USAID began its activities in Georgia almost immediately after its independence.

“For 27 years, the American people have provided over \$1.8 billion in assistance to Georgia through USAID. Building on this successful partnership, the U.S. Government dedicates approximately \$40 million annually to 50 wide-reaching programs that support Georgia’s democratic, free-market, Western orientation” (Georgia, 2022).

The US government annually allocates about \$40 million for 50 large-scale programs operating in the republic and aimed at supporting the democratic, market, and Western orientation of Georgia.

However, domestic political processes in Georgia became the reason for the concern of the US officials. During the time of Trump’s presidency in the US, several anti-democratic events occurred in Georgia that caused political crises in the country. The strong disagreement and permanent disputes between the ruling party and oppositional parties were negatively evaluated by the US Senators. The letters from the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Jim Risch, and the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, Jeanne Shaheen, to Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia, expressed “concern over recent events that indicate a backsliding from Georgia’s commitment to building the institutions of their democracy” (Civil.ge: U.S. Senators Risch, Shaheen Concerned for ‘Potential Backsliding of Georgian Democracy and Governance’, 2020).

Despite the successful development of bilateral economic relations, mostly in the energy sector, the democratization direction in Azerbaijan did not receive the development desired in Washington. Azerbaijani society refused to accept the imposed Western values.

“During 2020, the Azerbaijani government increasingly cracked down on members of the political opposition, leading the U.S. State Department and various human rights organizations to express concern about the overall deterioration of human rights and Baku’s growing disregard specifically for the freedoms of expression and assembly” (Bakken, 2021).

The Americans have repeatedly observed the harsh steps of the Azerbaijani state machine when opposition activists were arrested, religious figures were persecuted, and NGOs were closed (World Report 2018 - Azerbaijan, 2018).

Currently, the activities of Americans in Azerbaijan are aimed at expanding the participation of civil society in political processes and local self-government, with an emphasis on enhancing the role of women.

Over the past few years, the main efforts of the United States in Armenia have been aimed at creating an effective and transparent system of governance, fighting corruption, and protecting human rights. In 2015–2020 the US Embassy in Yerevan, together with the “Armenian Territorial Development Fund”, implemented the “Local Self-Government Reform Activities” program, the main task of which was the decentralization of power.

The government’s attempt to implement the new parliamentary-style constitution resulted in mass protests followed by a peaceful transition of political power. Mr.Serge Sarkisian resigned, and the National Assembly elected Mr. Nikol Pashinyan as PM. (USAID ARMENIA, 2020)

After the 'Velvet Revolution' Pashinyan, the Prime minister of Armenia embarked on an ambitious reform agenda, which focused on ending political influence over the courts, cleaning up corruption, and introducing a fairer tax system, curbing the shadow economy, and improving the investment environment. The reforms delivered some encouraging results, with Armenia moving up in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index from 105th place out of 180 countries in 2018 to 60th in 2020. There was similarly impressive progress on press freedom and democracy. The economy also performed strongly, recording its fastest growth rate (7.6 % in 2019) in over a decade. However, with the government reluctant to adopt unpopular, but necessary measures, reforms showed signs of running out of steam (European Parliament: A second chance for Armenia after elections? 2021).

Pashinyan is often seen as more pro-Western than his rivals. However, the election does not affect Armenia's geopolitical orientation; with two hostile neighbors (Turkey and Azerbaijan), it cannot afford to give up the protection afforded by its membership of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization alliance. Indeed, Russia's military presence in Armenia is set to increase.

Under the administration of Donald Trump, the emphasis on cooperation with the post-Soviet countries was shifted towards military and economic cooperation, and the “promotion of democracy” faded into the background. Funding for democratization programs was conditioned by guarantees of success in each specific country.

### **Economic relations**

The White House has the following interests in the region: providing access to Caspian oil, creating profitable transportation routes for the Caspian energy carriers bypassing Russia, ensuring the participation of American companies in the oil and gas sectors of the passing countries, as well as creating for them the maximum economic preferences. While some countries have become dependent on Russia because of the economic and political opportunities that it seems to offer, the countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia



and Ukraine have gradually been moving away from it. (Sonmez & Cobanoglu, 2016).

The highest interest of the USA in the Republic of Azerbaijan, apart from its geopolitically significant location (located between Russia and Iran), is largely due to economic factors and, above all, the desire to provide access to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

Under the slogan of "diversification" of energy transportation routes, the Americans are actively working to form an East-West energy corridor bypassing Russia from Central Asia and the Caspian Basin through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to Western Europe. The US provides active support to American oil companies to guarantee their investments in the Azerbaijani energy sector. The United States not only took an active part in the development and production of the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea but also in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline in order to transport Azerbaijani hydrocarbons to the world market. Under the administration of Donald Trump, successful cooperation between the US and Azerbaijan continued. In many respects, this was facilitated by the fact that the American leader himself was a successful businessman, therefore, with his arrival, the "green light" was given to build up economic cooperation with other countries. The US officials and the president himself have repeatedly emphasized the importance of oil and gas production in Azerbaijan and their role in world security.

In 2017, the "Contract of the Century" was extended by signing a new agreement on the joint development of three oil fields - Azeri, Chirag, and Gunashli in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea until 2050. (bp, 2022) The agreements underscored Baku's leadership in strengthening European energy security through the launch of Azerbaijan's Southern Gas Corridor initiative in 2018 to supply gas to Europe. The development of relations in other economic areas continues - in the mining, petrochemical, construction, transport, trade, logistics, telecommunications, agricultural, industrial, and tourism sectors, in the digital economy and the service sector. Today, about 260 American companies operate in Azerbaijan.

Shifting to a "new level of partnership" and building up economic cooperation were indicated by the parties during a meeting in Washington between Trump and the Prime Minister of Georgia Kvirikashvili in 2017 and during the visit in November 2020, US Secretary of State M. Pompeo in Tbilisi. Later, the American Agency for International Development allocated more than \$ 64 million to Georgia as assistance "to develop the economy and support the Euro-Atlantic integration"

The improvement of a partnership between the two countries allowed the United States to reduce the dominant role of Russia in the Caspian region. First, the Americans managed to achieve this through the construction of the

Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline through Georgian territory in 2005 without the participation of Russia to ensure the supply of energy resources in American interests.

However, it has not yet been possible to achieve effective cooperation in the economic sphere. Due to the poor investment climate and the high level of corruption in the country, American business has little interest in the Georgian economy.

From 2006 to 2011 the US provided financial support for the implementation of various social and agricultural programs through the American Millennium Challenge Account. In total, more than \$235 million was allocated to Armenia. Thanks to the assistance of the United States, Armenians took part in the loan and grant programs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, receiving about \$1 billion.

According to official information, the United States receives from the Republic of Armenia alcoholic beverages, canned fruits, carpets, diamonds, and other precious and semi-precious stones, metals, and aluminum. Armenia imports cars, office equipment, medical equipment, medicines, cell phones, clothes, and meat from the United States (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA, 2022).

However, Under Trump's administration economic relations with Armenia, have significantly changed. If in 2017 about 26.5 million dollars were allocated to the Armenians, then in 2020 only 6.75 million dollars were allocated, of which only 800 thousand were provided for economic development. This is largely due to the dissatisfaction of the Americans with the foreign policy pursued by Yerevan and its unwillingness to distance itself from Russia.

Washington will probably continue to provide its support to Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in order to ensure economic development, modernize economies, carry out reforms, fight corruption and create conditions for the growth of economic and investment attractiveness of the region.

## **Results and discussion**

We found out how significant the role of the United States is in stabilizing the situation in the South Caucasus. It is obvious that Russia will try to keep the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in a "frozen mode" to control the region. Russian influence on the region can be dangerous for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to lose their independence and become parts of Russia, therefore, quit their democratic development and accept an authoritarian regime.

The US new administrations, certainly, will always have different priorities of Foreign policy toward Transcaucasia, however, it is very



important for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to keep improving the level of their political, economic, and democratic development in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The main slogan of President Donald Trump was: “America first, make America great again” shows that he and his administration’s priorities were domestic processes in the United States. We can not see many activities in the foreign policy, especially towards Transcaucasia. From 2017 to 2020 Georgia still kept being the number one strategic partner of the US and during this time the relations between the two countries became stronger, especially in military cooperation and security issues. The high number of official meetings between Georgian and US officials shows the progress of strategic partnership and bilateral interests.

However, we cannot say the same about Armenia and Azerbaijan. Trump’s administration did not interfere and take any radical steps to deescalate the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. President Trump called both sides to cease-fire but it was not enough to stop it. The war of 2020 between these two countries changed the geopolitical situation in the region and gave Russia more control and power there.

## **Declaration of interest statement:**

I, Marine Changiani, the author of this article hereby declare that I do not have any personal, financial interest, or belief that could affect the objectivity of the work reported in this paper.

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