



TURKEY AND THE UNITED STATES

Pursuing Common Interests in the South Caucasus

John R. Barnett

Recent developments in the tragic, highly complex Syrian conflict have created difficulty for the United States, but they have also yielded previously improbable opportunities. Russia's bold military gamble, which began with the deployment of forces to coastal areas of Syria in late summer 2015, surprised and confused the international community while reinvigorating Iran's regional schemes and operations. But through this action, Russian president Vladimir Putin has given the United States and Turkey a reason to work through past differences and more assertively counter Moscow's ambitions in its own backyard.



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John R. Barnett, a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute, is a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and an Air Force Regional Affairs Strategist. He has completed command tours in Turkey and South Asia.

While all eyes remain focused on Moscow's dramatic entry into the Syria conflict and the evolving alliance with Tehran, policymakers and military planners should not forget about Putin's ambitions in Russia's "near abroad," including the South Caucasus republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. By capitalizing on existing structures and interoperability, the United States and Turkey can thwart Russia's efforts to expand its influence in the area, obliging Moscow to rein in its plans *further* abroad because it must allocate more resources closer to home. Ankara and Washington, by keeping Moscow in check, would advance many shared interests in the South Caucasus, including diversification of energy sources and trade, strengthening of democratic institutions, and fostering of resolution to decades-old conflicts.

But this would not have been an easy marriage prior to the Syrian conflict. Over the past decade, relations between Ankara and Washington have ebbed and flowed. The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) gradually distanced Turkey from the West, and the U.S. and Turkish governments have had difficulty working together to advance shared interests on emerging issues in the Middle East and elsewhere. Until very recently, Moscow has sought to fill this vacuum by increasing its sway over Turkey's foreign policy decisions.

Russia's military intervention in Syria, however, is pushing Ankara to change the existing equation and seek more common ground with the United States. The establishment of a Russian airfield in Latakia on Turkey's southern flank, multiple reports of Syria-based Russian jets and drones violating Turkish airspace, the subsequent Turkish downing of a Russian fighter jet, which drew tremendous Russian indignation, and increasing concern that Syrian Kurdish forces will support Russia's overall objectives at the expense of Turkey's security have all given Erdogan a reason to reassess his country's relations with Moscow.

Additionally, the increasing and emboldened presence of Iranian forces and Iran-backed Hezbollah elements in Syria, and the implications of the nuclear agreement with Iran, offer reasons for Ankara to carefully assess potential Iranian actions in immediate neighboring regions where its greatest interests are found. Buoyed by sanctions relief, a future Iran could well be more confident and better resourced.

Erdogan, spurred by Russia's threats, has now realized the utility of being a NATO partner, and he shares Washington's interest in containing the Russia-Iran axis before it can broaden its footprint along Turkey's borders. Such a larger footprint could ultimately propagate a zero-sum game for the involved nations, bottle up Turkey's energy and trade routes, discourage foreign investment, and weaken Turkey's stance in the region. Washington may now have the partner it needs to bolster its policy and engagement with the South Caucasus.

Converging U.S.-Turkish Interests

Since Turkey's November 2015 downing of the Russian plane that was reportedly violating its airspace, Ankara and Moscow have been involved in a tense back-and-forth, with both sides posturing and warning the other of future repercussions. Russia, recognizing Ankara's NATO affiliation, did not treat Turkey like it did two non-NATO states, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and has kept direct military intervention off the play sheet for now. Needless to say, Ankara's perceptions about "zero problems with neighbors," especially with Russia and Iran, are changing significantly.

The United States and Turkey now share an interest in containing Russian adventurism and encouraging good behavior from Iran, and these shared interests should form the basis for a common strategy toward the Caucasus. Turkey—located at the geostrategic nexus of the Middle East, Europe and the Balkans, Russia, and the South Caucasus—is a longtime ally of the United States. Even if that alliance has sometimes been strained, both countries have an opportunity to capitalize on their advantages, existing capabilities, and infrastructure to engage more effectively in the South Caucasus.

While the current Middle East crises will require careful diplomacy, savvy military engagement, and years—perhaps decades—to reach resolution, the South Caucasus offers Washington a current entry point to reinforce Turkey's position, curb Russian and Iranian ambitions, ensure democracy is nurtured and sustained, lower tensions in the existing conflicts, and, importantly, gain international leverage to garner Russian and Iranian support on key matters such as cooperation in Syria and Iraq. All three Caucasus countries, to varying degrees, have looked westward for support and leadership since the fall of the Soviet Union. Washington, after

its announced “reset” with Moscow in 2009, relaxed its engagement in countries within Russia’s supposed sphere of influence, including the South Caucasus, with the expectation that Moscow would create structures that foster stability and reduce conflicts in its immediate neighborhood. Unfortunately, Moscow simply has not taken these steps.

Even though the territories are quite removed from today’s headlines, U.S. interests in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are tangible. As one commentator noted, “The U.S. ignores the South Caucasus at its own peril.” This is so because of the spillover effect of deeply entrenched conflicts and Russian expansionism, which will inevitably bind U.S. regional ties with these states’ future security and stability.¹ Specifically, the sovereignty of nations, democratic institutions, and collaborative security constitute the bedrock of effective cooperation among governments.² Such a principle was tested after the 9/11 attacks, when the response of former Soviet regional states to U.S. requests for assistance “correlated exactly with the degree of their independence from Moscow.” Azerbaijan and Georgia were two examples.³

Likewise, the United States and Turkey can help protect the unobstructed flow of trade and energy resources from the region both eastward and westward. Ensuring that Europe and Turkey can benefit from Azeri and Caspian energy production and find greater trade opportunities via the South Caucasus to Iran, Central and South Asia, and China will create longer term stability and a more balanced international energy structure. Allowing Russia to dominate economic and energy trade flow in the region, by contrast, will undermine such balance and increase Turkish and European dependence on Russian-controlled resources and products while lessening U.S. influence.

Since the Soviet Union’s collapse, the three republics in question have become more vital to regional and global security, and they desire greater diversification and freedoms—aspirations their large northern neighbor seems to dismiss or even disdain. Given Moscow’s threats to cancel the major Turkish Stream pipeline project and other initiatives, Ankara will need to hasten its search for alternative energy and trade sources. Ankara is ideally positioned to be a regional partner for Washington based not only on its location and concerns over Russian and Iranian hegemonic designs but also its

desire to strengthen relations with its Caucasian neighbors to the east. Washington and Ankara thus have a tremendous opportunity, driven by Putin’s aggressive posturing, to act boldly.

Turkey’s Need for Independent Neighbors

The year 2015 will be remembered in Turkey as a period of political turmoil, terrorism, and polarization. Erdogan’s own AKP experienced a jolting ride, losing its electoral majority for the first time in more than a decade only to call snap elections later in the year and restore its prominence. In doing so, the AKP exploited national security fears following domestic terrorism acts by the Islamic State and reopened old wounds by ending a two-year ceasefire and resuming hostilities with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Today, polarization in Turkey remains serious.⁴ This unsettled position is quite untimely, given attempts by external actors to increase their presence and gains in Turkey’s near abroad, with no regard for Ankara’s interests.

Given this backdrop, Turkey desperately needs less, not more, Russian intervention and Iranian meddling on its borders, including in the South Caucasus. Ankara, like Washington, views the region as a geostrategic opportunity to work with like-minded, democratic, and independent states on numerous issues, such as increasing trade, diversifying energy sources, and fostering security alliances to counter transnational crime, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism. This common ground exists despite U.S. discomfort with Erdogan’s authoritarian tendencies. Over the next decade, using the South Caucasus as a transit point for key Turkish exports to Central Asia—e.g., machinery, iron and steel products, clothing—could become particularly important as commerce with Middle East nations grows less reliable amid the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts and open disagreements with Iran over the region’s future.

In diversifying Turkey’s energy resources, the South Caucasus will be critical. Current data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration indicates that Russian supplies account for almost 60 percent of Turkey’s natural gas consumption, with demand growing. Additionally, Iran provides more than 25 percent of Turkey’s crude oil requirements and 20 percent of its natural gas supplies.⁵ As Russia and Iran’s alliance strengthens through shared interests in the Middle East, the need for

Turkey to seek other sources is becoming more evident. Azerbaijan currently provides 10 percent of Turkey's gas needs, but that figure will ultimately rise thanks to the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) project—begun in 2015 and slated for completion in 2018—so long as the route remains free of external interference.⁶

In the event of expanded influence by Moscow and Tehran in the South Caucasus, Ankara may be forced to rely even more on Russian-controlled gas and Iranian petroleum resources, further strengthening these countries' sway over Turkish foreign policy and influence at a time when both have growing military footprints on Turkey's southern flank. Fence-sitting nations and ethnic blocs on Turkey's periphery, experiencing confusion over the U.S. and Turkish regional roles, may in turn be attracted to more active and present protector nations such as Russia and Iran.

While sorting out their respective Syria courses of action with all the involved stakeholders, Ankara and Washington can now highlight other areas of common ground and jointly pursue them in the South Caucasus to stifle Russia's expansionist schemes. Ankara should be eager to follow such a course given Russia's limit-pushing actions in the Middle East, not to mention its direct challenges to Turkey's sovereignty, over the past year.

Russian Dominance of Turkey

For both historical and contemporary reasons, Turkey fears Russia more than any other country.⁷ During the Ottoman centuries, Russia instigated at least seventeen fights against the Turks, winning all of them, along with war's spoils.⁸ Remembering these indignities, the newly created Turkish republic became a staunch U.S. ally and a committed NATO member. It aimed to thwart the Soviet Union's aggressive encroachment on more Turkish territory following World War II and later to impede Russia's attempts to control greater economic, energy, and military sectors along and beyond Turkey's borders.⁹

Over the past decade, however, Russian-Turkish relations have improved for various reasons. Namely, the European Union's reluctance to offer Turkey a clear road map for eventual membership along with discord with the United States over Iraq and other issues have pushed Ankara elsewhere, including to Russia. Economically, both nations have benefited from annual trade that has

risen to more than \$30 billion, along with potential shared pipeline and nuclear energy projects.¹⁰ Although these projects are now suspended owing to heightened tensions, Russia has exploited this economic relationship for geopolitical gains for some time, preventing Turkey from interfering with Moscow's maneuvering in the Caucasus and elsewhere.

Because Ankara depends heavily on Russia for natural gas distribution and trade, it had remained reluctant to challenge Moscow on significant geopolitical issues until recently and only with U.S. and NATO top cover. In 2008, the Erdogan government trod very carefully regarding Russia's invasion of Georgia; six years later, Turkey refused to endorse Western sanctions over Russia's 2014 Crimea annexation. Erdogan's September 2015 visit to Moscow reinforced this dynamic—after meeting with Putin, he modified his otherwise staunch “Assad must go” stance, with the seeming goal of placating the Kremlin over its Syria activities.¹¹

But this rhetorical acquiescence did not resolve the countries' underlying differences on Syria, with divisions now becoming visibly volatile. For instance, Syrian Kurdish militias have publicly announced that they will consider siding with Moscow and the Bashar al-Assad regime to pursue common interests in northern Syria, including around Aleppo.¹² In turn, Ankara views the Syrian Kurdish fighters as a franchise of its own PKK and is concerned that the latter could exploit any territorial and weaponry gains to Turkey's detriment.¹³

Shortly after Putin's intervention, Ankara voiced frustration over reports of Russian planes and unmanned drones crossing into Turkish airspace. In late November 2015, the tensions reached a boil after the Turkish shoot-down of the Russian plane.¹⁴ The Russian pilot and a marine involved in the search-and-rescue effort were killed, helping fuel Putin's charge that Turkey's actions were premeditated. Shortly thereafter, Russia's Ministry of Defense announced it would deploy S-400 missile-defense assets in the Mediterranean region, in easy range of Turkish territory.¹⁵ Erdogan, seemingly backed into a corner, criticized Russia's repeated violations of Turkish sovereignty and defended Turkey's actions, but at the same time his government quickly sought talks with Moscow, which was threatening aggressive consequences that could damage Turkey's economy.

However successful the short-term diplomacy, future confrontations are probable, and these could continue eroding the Ankara-Moscow relationship. Ripple effects have already surfaced in areas such as Georgia, where Turkish transport trucks were recently refused entry and forced to turn back, or else delayed, following heavy searches.¹⁶ Given its strong leverage in the Caucasus, Russia may take even greater advantage of this position. For Ankara, given its fears of further retaliation and its energy dependence, the benefits of identifying other economic and energy partners will likely be evident.

The Kremlin's Calculus in the South Caucasus

In Moscow's eyes, the South Caucasus should once again be under Russian dominion. Putin himself has openly described the Soviet Union's disintegration as a disaster and has not hidden his enmity toward Western interference in Russia's former Soviet territories. By annexing Crimea, Putin sent a clear message to the South Caucasus nations that he will reassert Russian hegemony via soft and hard power, as necessary. His methodical attempts to expand Moscow's political, economic, and military influence over Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have met with little to no international backlash. Indeed, Russia elevated these nations as priorities just as the United States, Europe, and Turkey had seemingly downgraded them.

In particular, Armenia's already shaky ties to the West have diminished somewhat, even as they remain tight with its former Soviet overlord. Some observers describe Armenia as a "vassal" state of Russia given its dependence on Russian trade and military supplies, willingness to host Russian forces in its territory, deference to Moscow on key foreign policy decisions, and membership in Russian-led regional economic and security organizations.¹⁷ Demonstrating its grip, Russia refuses to let non-Russian energy corporations control any distribution in Armenia and has garnered support from Yerevan on all major foreign engagements and interventions, including the Crimea annexation.

Russia's 2008 military intervention in Georgia was aimed at supporting the separation of two enclaves, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Whereas each side blamed the other for instigating the conflict, Tbilisi—overestimating a possible Western counterresponse—challenged

Russia directly and paid a significant territorial and economic price. Since then, Russia has occasionally hinted at annexing both territories, which have quietly, under Russian protection, been advancing their borders further into Georgian lands. During an August 2015 visit to Washington, Georgian defense minister Tinatin Khidasheli spoke candidly about this aggressive posture, highlighting a July incident in which the Russian border guard moved South Ossetia's administrative boundary further south to encompass part of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline.¹⁸ Other Georgians, within the last two years, have described waking up to find themselves in Russia-dominated South Ossetia and barricaded behind fences cutting them off from their villages and families still on the Georgian side.¹⁹

Azerbaijan, thanks to its vast fossil fuel reserves and Western-leaning economic and social interests, has had slightly more success than its neighbors in maintaining distance from Moscow. Based, however, on Putin's comment that Russia will "never leave" the South Caucasus region and on his corresponding actions, he appears set on squeezing Azerbaijan and limiting its exploitation of resources unless Russia, too, profits.²⁰ Baku, cognizant of Georgia's fate in 2008, has responded cautiously to Moscow, partly owing to a sense of reduced U.S. interest in the region, allowing for continued Russian dominance.

Additionally, the persistent conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region pits Armenia—which effectively controls the area, constituting 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory—against Azerbaijan in a decades-old, potentially explosive contest. Russia has blatantly and continuously exploited this situation to keep the West and foreign investors off-balance while justifying greater Russian intervention in the region.

For instance, Moscow has steadily augmented its air and ground forces at its military bases near the Armenian cities of Gyumri and Yerevan, where it has basing rights through 2044.²¹ Speculation continues about the Kremlin's intention to position "peacekeeping" troops in Nagorno-Karabakh under the pretense of preventing further conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.²² Indeed, Russia is so deeply embedded militarily in Armenia that it essentially oversees the country's air-defense operations and has recently concluded a formal agreement with Yerevan to create a joint air-defense structure in Armenia, with one objective being

to protect Russia's southern flank.²³ Moscow has simultaneously strengthened its relations with Baku through military sales, bolstering the perception that it will exploit both sides of the conflict to increase its military and political influence.

Coupling soft and hard power, Russia continues to expand its exports to all three countries, totaling approximately \$3 billion in 2014, while importing less than half that amount, thereby increasing deficits to Russia.²⁴ Additionally, Moscow has sought to incorporate the region's states into the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), with Armenia joining in January 2015. Integrating Georgia and Azerbaijan would further increase Russia's sway over economic markets and the exploration and transit of vast natural resources. Moscow's monopolistic winner-take-all approach to trade comes at the expense of the region's countries and their neighbors, such as Turkey. At present, Putin apparently sees little incentive to change his course.

At the same time, the Kremlin has coopted another nation-state with shared interests to further its geopolitical and military objectives. The Islamic Republic of Iran has newfound confidence due in part to Moscow's recent Middle East interventions as well as to the ramifications of the nuclear accord with the P5+1 nations.

An Emboldened Iran

Flexing assertive regional policies on the one hand, while harboring seemingly opaque motives on the other, the Islamic Republic often drives neighboring countries such as Turkey to cooperate principally on transactional terms. As one Middle East scholar observes, "Nothing in Iran is as it seems; things are often to the contrary. Certainty regarding intentions, power relationships, and decision making processes and outputs is often elusive."²⁵ Iran's apparently contradictory foreign policy style occasionally drives Western governments to view Tehran's actions as irrational. However, Iran's foreign policy and interventions are tightly interwoven with the Islamic Republic's core identity and objectives—the latter centering on globally recognized hegemony over a stable Middle East.²⁶ Therefore, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the country's final authority on foreign policy issues, bases all key decisions on achieving this goal.²⁷ Another expert notes that Iran's decisionmaking may be considered rational within this context; this, however,

does not mean Iran always acts "reasonably"—that is, in moderate, predictable, open ways—by international standards.²⁸ Hence, from Tehran's perspective, Turkey, a strong regional power, is seen mainly as a competitor or obstacle to Iran's long-term goals but one with occasional, narrow shared interests.

Turkey does not fear Iran as it does Russia, but it eyes Tehran's activities in shared geographic areas of interest with suspicion. Despite arguably improved relations between Sunni-majority Turkey and Shiite-majority Iran during the Erdogan era, the two nations have not always acted harmoniously or fostered stability in their environs. The regional giants have jostled indirectly to keep the other's ambitions and influence in check. For instance, Tehran has exploited Turkey's Kurdish troubles and aided the PKK at the most inopportune times for Ankara, creating deep bilateral tensions.²⁹ Iran's meddling in internal Turkish matters, strategic alliance with Russia, and brazen hegemonic pursuits elsewhere have resulted in additional strains such as those associated with their differing visions of the end state of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Iran, though unlikely to ever directly challenge Turkey militarily, would see great benefit in a less influential, weakened neighbor.

In March 2015, Erdogan warned Iran, in a clear, concise message, that Turkey will not sit idly by while the Islamic Republic attempts to dominate the Middle East.³⁰ Ankara then pledged to provide more intelligence and other support to Saudi Arabia, with which it has not always shared common interests, in its fight against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.³¹ Most recently, Qatar agreed to base an estimated three thousand Turkish troops in the country for training and other as-yet-unspecified security reasons, a move that, from Tehran's perspective, will undoubtedly be seen as Turkish encroachment.

Erdogan's message marked a course change for relations with Iran but not a surprise. In Iraq, for instance, Turkey and Iran have supported opposing political factions with different objectives. Tehran's connections to the Iraqi central government are strong and influential, whereas Ankara has fostered greater cooperation economically and via direct energy trade with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq while championing stronger Sunni Arab influence in the Shiite-dominant Baghdad government.

While Ankara has pushed a post-Assad program for Syria, Tehran—like Moscow—has fortified its presence on Turkey’s southern flank for long-term gain. It has done so not only by training and mentoring Syrian forces “but also by providing billions of dollars in cash and oil to the regime while burrowing into Syria’s civil society and economy.”³² Iran’s absolute commitment to maintaining and bolstering the pro-Iran Assad regime is rooted in a desire to project power regionally and facilitate materiel support to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. With large Iranian and pro-Iran elements in Syria and Iraq now protected by Russian forces, Ankara’s concerns about the Russia-Iran partnership are hardly surprising.

Iran’s expanded military reach and proxy activities correlate with the recent completion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), aimed at impeding Iran’s ability to develop nuclear arms. The expected 2016 lifting of U.S. and EU sanctions, once the International Atomic Energy Agency verifies Iran’s compliance with the JCPOA, will eventually free an estimated \$50 billion in assets for Tehran’s use.³³

While Tehran has many internal development and economic needs to address, the diversion of even a small portion of this funding could increase terrorism, propaganda, and destabilization efforts aimed at facilitating Iran’s hegemonic ambitions, as carried out by the IRGC’s Qods Force and Iranian proxies. The recently signed purchase from Russia of the highly advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile-defense system already has many regional neighbors concerned.³⁴ To be sure, the JCPOA stipulates that sanctions can be reinstated should Iran violate its nuclear-program-related commitments. But Tehran likely recognizes that once the sanctions are lifted, the likelihood of any significant “snap-back” sanctions based on perceived minor violations is very low. Some experts argue that the debate over what constitutes a violation could well lead to international stalemates and ultimately lack of will to derail the nuclear agreement.³⁵

As Iran’s confidence and resources increase, so will its ability to exploit countries in its near abroad, including Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Unfearful of punishment for bad behavior, the Islamic Republic may feel less restricted to expand its regional influence and activity even as it refrains from challenging Russia directly.

In fact, Tehran may see bargaining chips in the South Caucasus that could support both countries’ aims. Undoubtedly, Tehran’s regional involvement will grow in the coming years—and not necessarily to the benefit of the resident nations or their Western allies.³⁶

Iran’s Ambitions in the South Caucasus

Given the lack of consistent Western engagement in Transcaucasia, Tehran will pursue its unfinished business in the region, albeit treading carefully with Moscow. While Iran and Russia have effectively aligned themselves to pursue interests in the Middle East, the countries do not necessarily consider themselves friendly. Rather, their alignment reflects a desire mainly to accomplish national aims and counter U.S. and NATO influence. The Supreme Leader’s top foreign policy advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, recently noted that “shared interests of [Russia and Iran] in the region call for closer cooperation. One of the goals is to prevent NATO expansion in the north of Iran and in southern Russia. NATO is trying to expand towards the Chinese border. It is our and Russia’s shared interest to prevent the hegemonic expansion of NATO, which is a collective colonialism...They want to infiltrate the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. We, and the Russians, oppose this. This is a shared interest.”³⁷ Undoubtedly viewing the South Caucasus as yet another venue to exploit, the Islamic Republic already has a solid regional connection from which to advance its agenda. Related alliances, based primarily on interests rather than ideology, include a strong economic, political, and trade relationship with Armenia and growing trade with Georgia, both predominantly Christian countries, while it sees Azerbaijan, which is predominantly Shiite, more as an adversary (as discussed later).

To be sure, Tehran does not desire an open, Western-oriented South Caucasus. It sees Georgia in particular as a territory where it can wield economic influence and ultimately divert the country’s Western trajectory to a Southern one. Further, Iran has criticized Georgia’s NATO-accession talks as regionally destabilizing and warned that the West gave Tbilisi little support in 2008, when the Georgians needed it most. Iran has correspondingly indicated that it can act as a counterbalance to other regional stakeholders.³⁸ Tbilisi has been cautious in dealing with Iran, which offers the diversified

energy sources and commercial markets craved by Georgia—roles Iran will likely fill even more robustly once sanctions are relaxed. At the same time, Iran's rhetorical call for regional stability has been contradicted by its actions. In 2012, according to clear indicators, the Qods Force was behind a failed terrorism plot against an Israeli diplomat in Tbilisi.³⁹ Lifted sanctions, then, should boost Georgia-Iran trade, with Iran likely using its increased economic clout to steer Georgia away from the West and Turkey, although uncertainties remain.

Iran-Armenia commerce will also undoubtedly be increased by the lifting of sanctions. Armenia, although careful not to incite Russia, has consistently sought ways to further its relationship with Iran. Specifically, Yerevan is investing heavily in hydroelectric production and looking to sell more electricity—as well as other nonenergy commodities, such as machinery and airplane and vehicle parts previously subject to sanctions—to Tehran.⁴⁰ A multibillion-dollar railway system between the two countries, a project that has generated strong joint interest, would help Iran cut its own trade-transport costs while also serving as a bridge to Armenia's external investors via Iranian ports.⁴¹ These opportunities could strengthen both countries' economies, while holding broader benefits for the region. But considering Iran's historically aggressive stance toward Azerbaijan, such moves could actually create greater Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions, increasing the odds of renewed violence over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Tehran's suspicions toward Azerbaijan center on Iran's own ethnic Azeri population of some 18–25 million, who live in the country's north. Tehran has long felt concerned that Baku could incite Iran's Azeri's to anti-government action.⁴² Likewise, Tehran disapproves of Azerbaijan's Western-leaning tendencies and friendship with Turkey, modernizing efforts, strong cooperation with Israel, and increased confidence due to fossil fuel discoveries and pipeline development circumventing Iran. The Islamic Republic, through soft power, intimidation, infiltration of Iranian clerics into Azeri mosques, and even violence, has repeatedly attempted to weaken and destabilize Azerbaijan with the intention of establishing more dominion over its energy and foreign policies.⁴³ Likewise, Iran, via its Qods Force or proxies, has been found responsible for terrorism plots and attacks in Azerbaijan, as in Georgia, over the last

few years and has exploited drug trafficking transit points in Azerbaijan.⁴⁴ Iran also continues to challenge Azerbaijan and other Central Asian countries such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan on national-boundary issues in the Caspian Sea, which has halted these countries' fossil fuel exploration and development and stifled their potential gains, with Iran's markets standing to mop up the benefits.⁴⁵

Adding to Tehran's preoccupations, Azerbaijan and Turkey consider themselves more than allies. In fact, former Azeri president Ilham Aliyev described the Turkic nations' relationship as "one nation with two states." In the past five years, Ankara and Baku have added formal structure to their partnership, including a mutual-assistance agreement in 2010 involving a pledge of military support, as well as energy accords in 2011 specifying quantities and costs of natural gas to be supplied to Europe through Turkey.⁴⁶ Any Iranian meddling in Azerbaijan is thus likely to be viewed as an affront to Turkey as well.

While the South Caucasus will continue to be a second priority for Tehran after the Middle East, the region will nonetheless be important. The rationale for Iran's regional involvement should be examined according to its earlier-noted primary objective—becoming the ranking Middle East power. This explains why the Islamic Republic may look to expand its strategic alliance with Russia in the region. With the Kremlin a newly established Middle East facilitator and also eager to augment influence in areas such as the South Caucasus, Tehran may once again prove a valuable partner for Russia against the West.

Among Iran's likely actions following the lifting of sanctions and reopening of markets will be reinvigorated efforts to engage economically with its northern neighbors. At the same time, to advance its hegemonic plans, and in support of Russia's strategic aims, it may attempt to push Armenia and Georgia further away from the West while pressuring Azerbaijan in ways that make Baku more reliant on Moscow for protection, rather than Ankara. This scheme will play into Putin's strategy to monopolize energy resources and markets in its near abroad. In exchange, Iran may be well poised to pursue its hegemonic ideals in the Middle East, its top priority, with Russian top cover. Iran's position in the South Caucasus, once sanctions are relaxed, remains difficult

to predict. But, historically, it has not always been a good neighbor and has sought gains at the expense of the region, the West, and Turkey.

The U.S. Role

The merits of a more focused, higher profile U.S. policy in the South Caucasus would be increased pressure on Russia's economy and a check on its military adventurism along with greater leverage for Washington. Likewise, a serious U.S. and Turkish commitment to the region, including security guarantees, would curtail Iran's exploitation of the Caucasus and ultimately encourage Iran toward better behavior lest it be excluded from the region's economic opportunities. Ultimately, the U.S. role should be premised not only on limiting the negative effects of Russian and Iranian regional ambitions but also on striving for normalization and reduction of the conflicts that feed the Russian narrative for intervention.

Currently, the region's leaders seem uncertain of Washington's long-term position—Vice President Joe Biden's 2009 visit to Tbilisi and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trips in 2010 and 2012 were meaningful and well received, but the dearth of specific U.S. commitments may have come across more as mollifying Russia than fostering stronger U.S. engagement. Moscow's ensuing actions in Ukraine and Syria should provide the impetus for more direct attention, however.

Any such enhanced engagement must begin with a clear statement supporting regional sovereignty and independence, and calling attention to a peaceful and democratic resolution of the continuing Georgia-Russia and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts via international consensus and rule of law. Such an approach would be designed to prevent Putin from using concocted justifications for future interventions.

Georgia's inclusion in NATO is being intensely debated, and here the context is helpful. Although heavily instigated by Moscow, Tbilisi's decision to fight Russia over its separatist territories has given Europe the impression that it is aggressive and could engage NATO prematurely in a conflict with Russia. Such premature engagement, the thinking goes, could allow Russia to challenge and compromise NATO in its periphery, far from the European mainland. As this paper has already noted, Georgia incorrectly assessed that its U.S. and

European allies would come to its aid against Russia. Preoccupied with Iraq and Afghanistan and seeking Russian support on other initiatives, including possible joint efforts to postpone Iran's nuclear weapons production capability, Washington and Europe were not inclined to engage militarily, even though the George W. Bush administration did respond to calm tensions and prevent further Russian aggression.

Both Washington and Ankara, recognizing that Georgia's inclusion in NATO does not now have the requisite European support, should campaign key European capitals to ensure they recognize that Russia, and not just Putin personally, presents a major and enduring challenge to NATO states and the global system. Officials should make clear that Russia's ambitions will not be assuaged by any form of compromise but that Moscow, a semirational actor, will respond to prudently executed challenges and containment.⁴⁷ Washington and Ankara, two NATO powerhouses with a consonant message, will garner Europe's attention by making this case.

In August 2015, NATO took a step in the right direction by opening the Joint Training and Evaluation Center in Tbilisi. This development drew a predictably strong reaction from Moscow, which called it “destabilizing” and “provocative,”⁴⁸ objecting for obvious reasons to a NATO presence at its doorstep. Whereas any serious consideration of Georgia's immediate admission to NATO may have seemed far-fetched in the past, Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015 have reopened this door. Indeed, Putin's unilateral, uncoordinated military deployments and activities have essentially obliged a U.S., Turkish, and NATO diplomatic response. Although NATO members should remain cautious and patient, they should set an end date and plan for Georgia's eventual inclusion in the NATO alliance. Such a step would signal to the region that the United States, Turkey, and NATO support democratic, independent countries in transition and in accordance with international norms and laws. An expression of long-term U.S. and Turkish commitment to the region would also help convince Azerbaijan and even Armenia that Russia and Iran are no longer the region's sole major stakeholders.

Simultaneously, the United States, working through the UN to garner European and Russian support,

should directly encourage resolution of the territorial disputes associated with Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both were formally Georgian territories, although with differing degrees of autonomy and with now differing residual tensions with Tbilisi. Left alone, Russia may find it advantageous to pursue a unilateral annexation of both areas, as it did to Crimea in 2014. In this negotiation, Washington should insist that the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia determine their future. Only an open referendum will determine their desires, and, indeed, for one or both territories, inclusion in the Russian Federation may be the most popular choice.⁴⁹ Once the popular will is determined, both Russia and Georgia will have to address the outstanding national boundary questions. Enlisting the UN as an interlocutor will give Tbilisi confidence that the process is just and that unfairly seized lands will be adjudicated under international law.

Meanwhile, increased engagement in the region will foster the conditions for greater U.S., Turkish, and European private investment and services, especially to support expanding fossil fuel exploration in Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea and ensure that existing efforts like British Petroleum's South Caucasus Pipeline expansion project continue without delay. Fully invested, the project, according to BP, is remarkably estimated to be on or even ahead of schedule.⁵⁰ Such outreach could also reassure Azerbaijan and Georgia that the strategic value of their efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the global counterterrorism campaign has not been forgotten. Likewise, it will reassure all regional countries that the Iran nuclear accord will not harm U.S. relations with them and will, in fact, strengthen cooperation. Of course, this engagement will encourage Russian and Iranian investment as well but as equal participants and not at the expense of the three host nations.

Armenia, following the Russian-Turkish standoff, will likely further tighten its alliance with Russia to pressure Turkey. Sharing borders with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Armenia has poor relations with all three neighbors and a suffering economy. A country oft-ignored by the West, in part because of its strong post-Soviet alliance with Russia, Armenia finds itself overly dependent on Moscow and, secondly, on Tehran. However, Yerevan does maintain relations with Western countries and could be offered ways to ease its isolation,

although near-term progress will be difficult. One way to assist Armenia in the longer term would be to strengthen the OSCE Minsk Group, which the United States cochairs with France and Russia, in facilitating a more permanent peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This could reduce Moscow's rationale to build up its regional military presence under a "peacekeeping" guise. Should Armenia's relations improve with its neighbors, over time its security will improve as well and Moscow's argument for maintaining such a robust military capability in the country will lose traction.

The extent of Yerevan's utter reliance on the Russian economic and political system is exemplified by Armenian press reports highlighting the control wielded by Russia's Gazprom over Armenia's natural gas supplies. Indeed, Gazprom, which furnishes most natural gas to Armenia, now controls the entire pipeline system, with origin points in Russia and Iran.⁵¹ In the past, Yerevan, surrounded by adversarial neighbors and having a weak military and economic infrastructure, saw little choice but to align with Russia, and that relationship remains strong. Armenia recently snubbed the West by joining the Russia-led EEU. However, a reinvigorated U.S. presence, together with Turkey's desire to reinforce regional stability, may create an opening for dialogue on investment opportunities, permanent border openings, and resolution of lingering disagreements. Since 2009, Ahmet Davutoglu, who was Turkey's foreign minister before becoming prime minister in 2014, signaled on several occasions, with Erdogan's support, Ankara's willingness to repair damaged relations with Armenia, including opening the borders.⁵² Azeri objections, however, have blocked actual progress. Nevertheless, a committed U.S. initiative could energize these important steps to ease tensions and strengthen cooperation despite the expected Russian objections and concerns from Azerbaijan—completely distrustful of Armenia—over a Turkish opening to Yerevan. Baku, seeing a strong U.S. and Turkish commitment, could feel less threatened by Russia and Iran and may eventually seek normalization.

Both Putin and Khamenei understand and respect clear shows of strength. The recent U.S.-led naval exercises in the Black Sea—dubbed Sea Breeze—and joint land-based military exercises in Georgia—Noble Partner and Agile Spirit—set a solid foundation, as did

Turkey's Caucasian Eagle exercises with Georgia and Azerbaijan in June 2015. Larger-scale exercises should be planned with both countries, cosponsored by the United States and Turkey under the NATO banner. Although Russia may object vociferously, it is dangerously overtaxing its defense-spending resources amid dire economic circumstances, a decreasing population, and enduring Islamic terrorist and separatist threats in some outlying republics.⁵³ Moscow will have to compromise.

In regional conflicts, Ankara and Washington should exploit their unique combined advantages—proximity and fifth-generation aircraft, respectively. Turkey's recent decision to let U.S. jets use Incirlik Air Base to target Islamist extremists in Syria was a transactional and limited deal, but it could facilitate more extensive joint efforts to give Russia strategic pause. Former U.S. ambassador James Jeffrey recently suggested that F-22 Raptors could be based in Israel to keep Moscow's Syria objectives in check.⁵⁴ Similarly, deploying the F-22—and, once operational, the F-35 joint strike fighter—to Incirlik to support Syria-related operations and conduct exercises with the Turkish, Georgian, and Azeri air forces would reinforce Washington and Ankara's commitment to the region. Even the feared Russian S-300/400 air-defense system is vulnerable to U.S. stealth aircraft. Additionally, as the U.S. Department of Defense considers the future of the military and the alignment of U.S. forces overseas, Turkey should be a serious part of the calculation.

Conclusions

The 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy highlights that “we will steadfastly support the aspirations of countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration, continue to transform our relationship with Turkey, and enhance ties with countries in the South Caucasus while encouraging resolution of regional conflict.” Vladimir Putin has provided the opportunity and reason to advance these goals.

Ironic as it may seem, a clear U.S. and Turkish commitment in the South Caucasus could ultimately promote greater cooperation with Russia and Iran on key areas, including resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; preventing the spread of Sunni Islamic extremism to the region; calming tensions with Turkey and Iran's

indigenous Kurdish and Azeri populations through better communication; countering narcotics and other illegal trafficking in the region; and establishing a more equitable approach to energy and trade resources. History has shown that once the United States demonstrates commitment to a specific objective, regional stakeholders, willingly or begrudgingly, find it difficult to ignore Washington's interests. But the United States needs to show its commitment.

Evelyn Farkas, who resigned in October 2015 as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, noted that “the countries around the periphery of Russia [with specific mention of Azerbaijan and Georgia, along with others], they need our political attention; they also need our economic assistance and then they need our military assistance. All of that attention and all of that very real assistance will deter Russia.”⁵⁵ In sum, without U.S. engagement, the region will become a zero-sum playing field for Russia and Iran, its larger neighbors to the north and south, on which the United States is further marginalized.

For their part, Tehran and Moscow realize that Syria will not be a quick success story and that their interests may diverge at some point regarding support to Assad. Moscow may eventually see benefit in removing Assad from power so long as the vacuum is filled by a government loyal to the Kremlin. Either way, in now standing by the old Damascus regime, both countries are spending valuable resources and losing their own personnel in the fight. Through October 2015, Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has suffered well over 150 deaths, including those of senior officers, on Syrian battlefields.⁵⁶

As for Erdogan, his efforts to distance his country from the West tend to subside when Turkey's core security interests are at stake. Amid Iran and Moscow's brazen military activities, he is finding himself uncomfortably squeezed and his country's interests undermined. Ankara likely realizes that it cannot impede Iranian and Russian designs unless it partners strategically with the United States, as it has done in the past. And clear and direct U.S. support to Ankara at this complex and dangerous time could demonstrate that the United States stands by one of its longest-standing allies, even during volatile periods in the relationship.

As this paper has argued, recent events surrounding

the Syrian crisis have given Washington and Ankara a tremendous chance to shake off past differences and more closely identify shared interests for enhanced long-term cooperation. At a time when Moscow is overextending itself and Iran, awaiting newfound

resources, is deeply entangled in the Middle East, Washington has an opportunity to contain Putin's ambitions and influence Tehran's decisions with only a modest investment of resources. In the South Caucasus, Ankara should now be part of that equation.

The views expressed in this Research Note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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