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The Ukraine–Russia War and the Reconfiguration of Strategic Autonomy in the South Caucasus: Azerbaijan’s Emerging Agenda-Setting Role

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Introduction

The war between Russia and Ukraine has evolved from a localized military confrontation into a profound structural rupture in the post–Cold War European and Eurasian security order. What initially appeared as a geographically contained conflict has gradually reshaped the fundamental logic of power projection, alliance cohesion, and strategic predictability across the wider region. Beyond its immediate battlefield dynamics, the war has disrupted established assumptions about deterrence, crisis management, and the sustainability of informal security arrangements in Russia’s near abroad. As a result, states situated along the geopolitical periphery of the conflict are reassessing long-standing security doctrines and recalibrating their foreign policy postures in response to a more fragmented and volatile international environment.

For the South Caucasus in particular, the war has functioned as an accelerator of trends that were already underway but had yet to fully materialize. These include the gradual recalibration of Russian influence under conditions of strategic overstretch, the parallel rise of regional agency among local actors, and the growing salience of strategic autonomy as a guiding principle for medium-sized states. The erosion of hierarchical security management has created both risks and opportunities, compelling regional actors to rely less on external guarantees and more on adaptive, interest-driven diplomacy. In this context, the South Caucasus is no longer merely a passive recipient of great-power competition, but an increasingly dynamic space where regional priorities and initiatives carry greater weight.

Azerbaijan occupies a distinctive position within this evolving strategic landscape. Neither a passive bystander nor a revisionist actor, Baku has demonstrated an increasing capacity to translate geopolitical disruption into agenda-setting leverage. Rather than reacting defensively to shifting power balances, Azerbaijan has pursued a calibrated strategy that emphasizes flexibility, resilience, and sovereign decision-making. This approach has allowed Baku to maintain constructive relations with multiple power centers while avoiding entanglement in rigid bloc politics or ideological alignment.

Over the medium term, the Ukraine–Russia war is likely to further reinforce Azerbaijan’s role as a pragmatic stabilizer, a regional connectivity hub, and an autonomous strategic actor within the South Caucasus. By engaging major powers selectively and issue-by-issue, Azerbaijan has preserved policy independence while expanding its diplomatic and economic relevance. This emerging role reflects not opportunism, but a maturing strategic doctrine—one that prioritizes stability, connectivity, and sovereignty in an increasingly uncertain regional order.

The War as a Structural Shock to the Regional Order

The war in Ukraine has imposed tangible and multidimensional constraints on Russia’s strategic bandwidth. Sustained military commitments, compounded by economic pressure and heightened diplomatic polarization, have limited Moscow’s ability to project influence simultaneously across multiple peripheral [theaters](#) with the same degree of coherence and intensity as before. The cumulative effect of these pressures has been a measurable strain on Russia’s capacity to function as the primary security manager across its near abroad. While Russia remains a consequential and structurally embedded actor in the [South Caucasus](#), its ability to operate as the uncontested arbiter of regional security dynamics has visibly diminished.

This shift should not be interpreted as a withdrawal of Russian [influence](#) from the region, but rather as a transition from comprehensive dominance to more selective and interest-driven engagement. Moscow’s regional posture increasingly reflects prioritization and risk management rather than omnidirectional control. As a result, the erosion of Russia’s previously monopolistic role has created strategic space for regional actors to reassess their priorities, [recalibrate](#) partnerships, and assert sovereign decision-making with greater confidence. Importantly, this recalibration has largely occurred without directly challenging Russia’s core interests, allowing for adaptation rather than confrontation within the regional order.

For Azerbaijan, this evolving environment has significantly reduced the structural penalties traditionally associated with the pursuit of strategic autonomy. The post-2020 regional landscape—shaped by new [realities](#) on the ground—combined with Russia’s heightened preoccupation with other strategic fronts, has enabled Baku to act with greater decisiveness in shaping diplomatic formats, security arrangements, and regional connectivity initiatives. Rather than operating within rigid externally defined frameworks, Azerbaijan has increasingly exercised initiative in setting

agendas and proposing solutions, reflecting a [shift](#) from reactive positioning to proactive regional engagement.

Taken together, these dynamics have contributed to a more fluid and pluralistic strategic environment in the [South Caucasus](#), one in which Azerbaijan's capacity to maneuver has expanded. The resulting balance does not negate Russia's relevance, but it does underscore a redefined interaction pattern—one where autonomy, adaptability, and calibrated engagement have become more viable tools for regional actors navigating an increasingly complex geopolitical [landscape](#).

Azerbaijan's Strategic Autonomy in Practice

Azerbaijan's approach to the Ukraine–Russia war has been characterized by strategic restraint and functional pragmatism. Rather than adopting ideologically driven positions or symbolic alignments, Baku has pursued a policy centered on interest-based calculation and institutional continuity. [Azerbaijan](#) has avoided rhetorical escalation, refrained from public positioning that could entangle it in bloc politics, and preserved working relations with all major stakeholders involved in or affected by the conflict. This posture does not reflect ambiguity or indecision; rather, it embodies a deliberate doctrine of strategic autonomy rooted in national interest, risk mitigation, and long-term stability.

Several interrelated dimensions [illustrate](#) this approach in practice:

- **Foreign Policy Balance:** Azerbaijan has sustained constructive relations with Russia while simultaneously deepening strategic cooperation with Türkiye and expanding engagement with European institutions. These [foreign policy vectors](#) are not treated as substitutes but as complementary instruments serving different strategic functions. By maintaining diversified partnerships, Baku has reduced exposure to unilateral pressure while avoiding zero-sum dynamics that could undermine regional [stability](#). This calibrated balancing has allowed Azerbaijan to maneuver within a complex geopolitical environment without becoming overly dependent on any single external actor.
- **Security Self-Reliance:** The lessons derived from recent regional and extra-regional conflicts have reinforced Azerbaijan's emphasis on self-reliance in security and [defense](#) planning. Rather than relying on external guarantors, Baku has prioritized the development of indigenous military capabilities, continued defense modernization, and the cultivation of flexible security partnerships. This [approach](#) enhances deterrence while preserving decision-

making autonomy, ensuring that Azerbaijan's security posture remains adaptable to evolving regional conditions.

- **Diplomatic Initiative:** Azerbaijan's growing confidence in hosting, facilitating, and shaping regional [dialogues](#) reflects a broader transition from agenda-taker to agenda-setter. Baku has increasingly positioned itself as a convening power capable of influencing post-conflict normalization processes and regional cooperation frameworks. This diplomatic assertiveness is not aimed at exclusion but at fostering locally grounded solutions that reduce reliance on external mediation and enhance regional ownership of peace and stability initiatives.

Within this framework, strategic autonomy should not be understood as detachment or isolation. Instead, it represents a model of calibrated engagement—anchored in sovereignty, reinforced by leverage, and sustained through pragmatic interaction with a diverse range of partners. In an era of heightened geopolitical uncertainty, this approach has enabled Azerbaijan to preserve flexibility while incrementally expanding its influence within the South Caucasus.

Implications for the South Caucasus

Over the next three to five years, the [Ukraine–Russia war](#) is likely to accelerate an ongoing rebalancing process in the South Caucasus, with Azerbaijan positioned as a central and increasingly influential actor within this evolving regional configuration. The cumulative effects of shifting power distributions, changing external priorities, and heightened regional agency suggest that the South Caucasus is entering a phase marked by greater local initiative and reduced [reliance](#) on singular external sponsors. In this context, Azerbaijan's strategic posture and policy choices are likely to play a defining role in shaping the region's trajectory.

First, regional mediation formats are gradually moving away from exclusive external sponsorship toward more locally [anchored](#) and regionally driven frameworks. Azerbaijan's consistent emphasis on bilateral engagement and regionally grounded solutions reflects not only growing diplomatic confidence, but also a pragmatic understanding of sustainability. By prioritizing formats that encourage direct ownership of outcomes, Baku has sought to reduce the fragility often associated with externally imposed arrangements. This approach enhances the durability of agreements while reinforcing the principle that regional stability is best managed by regional stakeholders themselves.

Second, connectivity and energy [corridors](#) linking the Caspian basin to European markets have acquired heightened strategic significance amid Europe's accelerated diversification efforts. Azerbaijan's role as a reliable energy supplier and a key transit state has expanded its diplomatic leverage while reinforcing its strategic autonomy. Beyond energy exports, these corridors contribute to broader economic interdependence and position Azerbaijan as a critical node in east–west connectivity. Over the medium term, this functional [relevance](#) is likely to translate into greater political influence, as stability in the South Caucasus becomes increasingly intertwined with wider European energy and transport security considerations.

Third, regional security dynamics are becoming more pluralistic and less hierarchical. While [Russia](#) remains a relevant and influential actor, no single power now exercises uncontested dominance over the South Caucasus security architecture. This emerging pluralism has created space for diversified security partnerships and more flexible arrangements that prioritize stability over rigid alignment. For Azerbaijan, this environment offers opportunities to engage [constructively](#) with multiple actors while avoiding dependency and minimizing exposure to geopolitical shocks.

Collectively, these trends point toward a South Caucasus that is [progressively](#) less defined by proxy competition and more by negotiated coexistence and pragmatic cooperation. The durability of this shift, however, will depend on the continued exercise of restraint by regional actors and their willingness to prioritize [long-term](#) stability over short-term advantage. If managed carefully, the coming years may mark a transition toward a more balanced and self-sustaining regional order.

Russia's Evolving Role: Constraint, Not Displacement

Importantly, Azerbaijan's rise as an emerging agenda-setter in the South Caucasus does not presuppose the marginalization of Russia or the erosion of its regional relevance. [Moscow](#) remains an essential actor in the regional equation, with enduring political, security, and historical interests that continue to shape the strategic environment. Azerbaijan's approach reflects an understanding that long-term regional stability cannot be achieved through exclusion or confrontation, particularly in a geopolitical context where Russia retains significant leverage and institutional presence. At the same time, the [Ukraine](#) war has unmistakably altered the terms under which regional engagement now takes place.

Rather than operating through hierarchical management or asymmetrical influence, Russia's future role in the South Caucasus is increasingly likely to [depend](#) on partnership, reciprocity, and respect for the sovereign decision-making of regional

states. Azerbaijan's evolving interactions with Moscow signal a clear preference for functional cooperation over structural dependency. This model emphasizes predictability, mutual interest, and practical coordination while avoiding arrangements that limit policy [autonomy](#). If reciprocated, such an approach holds the potential to stabilize bilateral relations and contribute to a more balanced regional order grounded in shared responsibility rather than dominance.

This evolution underscores a broader systemic [reality](#) in the contemporary Eurasian landscape: influence is no longer secured solely through physical presence, legacy structures, or historical primacy. Instead, it increasingly derives from credibility, adaptability, and the ability to engage partners as equals within a changing [strategic](#) environment. For both Azerbaijan and Russia, the recalibration of expectations and methods of interaction will be central to shaping sustainable relations in the years ahead.

Conclusion: Strategic Autonomy as a Stabilizing Force

The Ukraine–Russia war has brought into sharp relief the vulnerabilities inherent in rigid alignment strategies and, conversely, the advantages of strategic flexibility in an increasingly fragmented international system. For Azerbaijan, the medium-term outlook points toward the continued consolidation of strategic autonomy—not as an end in itself, but as a practical mechanism for ensuring stability, resilience, and policy continuity. Rather than pursuing autonomy through disengagement, Baku has demonstrated that carefully calibrated engagement can enhance sovereignty while reducing exposure to external shocks.

This trajectory highlights a broader lesson emerging from the South Caucasus: stability is increasingly generated from within the region rather than imposed from outside. Azerbaijan's approach underscores the value of locally grounded initiatives that reflect regional realities and priorities. In this context, strategic autonomy functions less as a posture of separation and more as a framework for managing complexity, balancing interests, and preserving room for maneuver amid shifting geopolitical conditions.

Accordingly, light policy guidance emerges naturally from Azerbaijan's evolving practice. First, Azerbaijan should continue to anchor regional initiatives in locally driven formats, minimizing excessive external overreach while maintaining inclusivity and openness to constructive participation by external partners. Second, strategic communication with all major powers—including Russia—should remain focused on predictability, reciprocity, and non-exclusivity, reinforcing trust while safeguarding

sovereign decision-making. Third, sustained investment in connectivity, energy resilience, and diplomatic capacity will be essential in consolidating Azerbaijan's role as an agenda-setter and functional hub linking regional and extra-regional interests. In an international environment marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and competitive realignment, Azerbaijan's experience offers a relevant and instructive model. It illustrates how a medium-sized state can expand influence, preserve sovereignty, and contribute meaningfully to regional order without resorting to confrontation or ideological polarization. The coming years will inevitably test the durability of this approach. Nevertheless, current indicators suggest that strategic autonomy—when paired with restraint, pragmatism, and institutional confidence—can serve as a source of resilience rather than risk, both for Azerbaijan and for the wider South Caucasus.

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