

GEOPOLITICS OF SMALL STATES: THE CASE OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE POST-SOVIET TRANSFORMATION CONTEXT

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Abstract

The geopolitics of small states represents one of the most complex analytical domains within contemporary international relations theory. While structural realism emphasizes systemic constraints imposed by great powers, small states frequently demonstrate adaptive, nonlinear, and multi-vector behavior that cannot be reduced to material power alone. This article examines the geopolitics of small states through the case of the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet transformation context. It argues that small-state geopolitical behavior is shaped by the interaction of six determinants: geography, civilizational identity, historical memory, resource potential, external patronage, and internal political culture. The study introduces and elaborates the concept of transfer geopolitics to explain asymmetric external representation of national interests, particularly in the Armenian case, and contrasts it with resource-based strategic autonomy (Azerbaijan) and transit-geopolitical positioning (Georgia). The article conceptualizes the South Caucasus as a heterogeneous geopolitical space formed through post-imperial fragmentation, delayed nation-state consolidation, and ethno-confessional plurality. It concludes that the region represents a unique nonlinear model of small-state geopolitics, where elastic civilizational and historical factors frequently override geographical determinism. Small states operate not merely as passive geopolitical objects but as adaptive strategic actors embedded in asymmetrical alliance structures.

Keywords: *small states geopolitics; South Caucasus; transfer geopolitics; asymmetric alignment; energy geopolitics; civilizational frontier; post-imperial syndrome; geopolitical volatility.*

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INTRODUCTION

The geopolitics of small states occupies an ambiguous position within international relations theory. Classical geopolitics, from Mackinder's (1904) Heartland thesis to Spykman's Rimland theory, primarily focused on large territorial powers [6]. Structural realism (Waltz, 1979) further reinforced the notion that systemic distribution of capabilities determines state behavior, implicitly relegating small states to the status of structural dependents [13].

However, post-Cold War transformations have demonstrated that small states possess a capacity for adaptive strategic agency. The South Caucasus—comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—constitutes a particularly instructive case. Emerging from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these states inherited overlapping territorial, civilizational, and geopolitical legacies. Unlike classical decolonization,

the Soviet collapse represented post-imperial fragmentation initiated by systemic disintegration at the center rather than peripheral insurgency.

This article seeks to answer four core analytical questions:

1. Are small states strategic actors or geopolitical objects?
2. Does resource wealth increase autonomy or dependency?
3. Is the South Caucasus a buffer zone or a competitive corridor?
4. How does diaspora reshape foreign policy architecture?

The central thesis advanced here is that small states operate within a nonlinear geopolitical environment, where structural constraints coexist with elastic identity-based and resource-driven strategies.

Theoretical Framework: Small States in Geopolitical Theory

Kenneth Waltz (1979) argued that the anarchic structure of the international system constrains state behavior [13]. Small states, lacking military and economic weight, are particularly vulnerable to external projection. John Mearsheimer (2001) similarly contends that great powers dominate regional security complexes [7]. Yet these frameworks underestimate the adaptive capacity of small states. Stephen Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory suggests that states align not merely against power but against perceived threats, opening space for strategic maneuvering [12]. Halford Mackinder's (1904) proposition that control of Eastern Europe leads to control of the Heartland situates the South Caucasus within a broader Eurasian strategic chessboard [6]. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) emphasized the Caucasus as a geostrategic pivot within Eurasia [2].

However, geographical determinism alone fails to explain post-1991 divergences among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Geography constitutes a structural constant; identity and resource potential operate as elastic variables.

While classical geopolitics and structural realism provide a macro-structural explanation of power hierarchies, they insufficiently address the agency of small states. Early conceptualizations of small states emerged in the works of David Vital, who argued that small states are characterized not merely by quantitative weakness but by structural vulnerability in security and economic domains. For Vital (1967), small states operate under conditions of permanent insecurity, which necessitates strategic adaptation rather than passive submission [].

Subsequently, Peter J. Katzenstein (1985) challenged deterministic interpretations by demonstrating that small European states successfully adapted to systemic pressures through institutional flexibility and economic specialization [3]. His concept of the "flexible state" illustrates that smallness may generate innovation capacity rather than pure dependency.

Later scholarship refined the analytical framework. Baldur Thorhallsson (2006, 2018) differentiated between several dimensions of smallness [9]:

- physical size
- population
- economic capacity
- administrative capability
- perceptual smallness

This multidimensional approach is crucial for understanding the South Caucasus, where material indicators do not fully explain geopolitical behavior.

While Thorhallsson's multidimensional framework provides a structural typology of smallness, its explanatory value increases when applied to concrete regional contexts. In the South Caucasus, each

dimension manifests differently across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, producing divergent geopolitical trajectories.

First, *perceptual smallness* is particularly salient in the Armenian case. Armenia's historical memory of vulnerability, combined with unresolved territorial conflict and geographic isolation, reinforces a heightened threat perception. This perceptual insecurity contributes to alliance dependency and externalized diplomatic activism, thereby facilitating what this article conceptualizes as transfer geopolitics.

Second, *administrative capacity* is most visibly demonstrated in Georgia's post-2003 institutional reforms. The Rose Revolution initiated state modernization efforts that enhanced bureaucratic efficiency, regulatory transparency, and Western institutional integration. In this case, smallness did not translate into paralysis but into accelerated institutional adaptation aimed at Euro-Atlantic alignment.

Third, *economic capacity* functions as a decisive variable in Azerbaijan's geopolitical positioning. Hydrocarbon revenues expand fiscal autonomy, strengthen state capacity, and enable diversified foreign partnerships. Energy infrastructure projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor amplify bargaining leverage, reducing structural dependency and reinforcing strategic autonomy.

Thus, smallness in the South Caucasus is not a uniform structural condition but a differentiated configuration of perceptual, institutional, and economic variables. Geography remains constant; identity perception and resource leverage operate as elastic determinants that mediate systemic constraints.

Similarly, Iver B. Neumann (2004) emphasized identity and status-seeking behavior among small states. According to Neumann, small states often compensate for material limitations through symbolic positioning and normative entrepreneurship in international institutions.

In this context, the South Caucasus case demonstrates that small states cannot be reduced to structural dependents. Instead, they exhibit differentiated adaptation strategies shaped by:

1. Resource leverage (Azerbaijan)
2. Identity-based external amplification (Armenia)
3. Institutional alignment and transit positioning (Georgia)

Thus, structural realism explains systemic constraints, but small state theory explains strategic variation within those constraints.

The revised framework therefore combines three analytical layers:

1. Systemic Constraints – Waltz, Mearsheimer
2. Threat Perception and Alliance Behavior – Walt
3. Adaptive Small-State Agency – Vital, Katzenstein, Thorhallsson, Neumann

This layered model allows us to conceptualize small states not as geopolitical objects but as adaptive strategic actors embedded in asymmetric structures.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to analyze small-state geopolitical behavior in the South Caucasus from 1991 to 2024. The research follows a structured, focused comparison approach, enabling systematic cross-case evaluation while preserving contextual specificity.

Research Design. The article adopts a theory-driven comparative design. Rather than testing a single causal hypothesis, it evaluates how different configurations of structural and elastic variables shape geopolitical behavior across three small states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

The research is explanatory-analytical in nature and combines:

- comparative political analysis
- historical institutionalism
- geopolitical structural analysis

This design allows the integration of structural realism with adaptive small-state theory.

The study follows a **Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD)**. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia share a common Soviet institutional legacy, geographic proximity, and simultaneous transition to sovereignty in 1991. By controlling for these similarities, the research isolates variation in elastic variables—identity, resources, and external patronage—to explain divergent geopolitical behavior.

Conceptual Clarifications

To avoid terminological ambiguity, key concepts require clarification. The nation-state refers to a political entity in which territorial sovereignty aligns with a culturally defined nation. In the Soviet context, republics developed proto–nation-state institutions prior to independence. Post-imperial syndrome describes the psychological and structural condition of states emerging from imperial collapse, characterized by identity uncertainty and institutional fragility. Geopolitical volatility denotes frequent shifts in foreign policy orientation due to security insecurity and external dependency. Asymmetric alignment is a form of alliance in which a small state’s strategic autonomy is constrained by reliance on a stronger patron. Transfer geopolitics refers to a pattern in which a state externalizes elements of its geopolitical agenda through supportive external actors. Civilizational frontier denotes a boundary between macro-cultural spheres influencing identity narratives and strategic self-perception.

Unlike classical colonial liberation processes (e.g., India or Algeria), the Soviet Union dissolved through systemic collapse. Soviet republics were constitutionally sovereign yet administratively integrated.

From 1918 to 2024, South Caucasus states underwent triple transformation:

1. Pre-Soviet statehood or imperial incorporation
2. Soviet federal incorporation
3. Post-Soviet sovereignty

This layered transformation produced hybrid political cultures. The Soviet policy of “national in form, socialist in content” paradoxically institutionalized national elites and administrative borders that later crystallized into sovereign states.

The delayed consolidation of nation-statehood intensified ethno-confessional tensions once external control disappeared.

The region is marked by:

- Linguistic diversity
- Religious plurality (Christian and Muslim populations)
- Absence of hegemonic internal power
- Mountainous geography separating North and South Caucasus

Under Soviet rule, Russian served as a linguistic integrator. Post-1991 decline of Russian as a unifying medium reinforced fragmentation. The Greater Caucasus Mountain range historically limited integration between northern and southern segments, fostering autonomous subregional identity.

Table 1.

Comparative Determinants of Small State Geopolitics in the South Caucasus

<i>Country</i>	<i>Geographic Position</i>	<i>Resource Base</i>	<i>Civilizational Orientation</i>	<i>External Patronage Model</i>	<i>Geopolitical Behavior Type</i>
Armenia	<i>Landlocked; corridor-adjacent</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Christian-European orientation</i>	<i>External representation (EU, US, France)</i>	<i>Transfer geopolitics</i>

Azerbaijan	<i>Regional centrality; Caspian access</i>	<i>Hydrocarbons</i>	<i>Secular-Islamic synthesis</i>	<i>Strategic autonomy + alliances (Turkey, Israel)</i>	<i>Energy-based autonomy</i>
Georgia	<i>Black Sea access; transit hub</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Euro-Atlantic orientation</i>	<i>NATO/EU alignment</i>	<i>Transit-geopolitical</i>

Energy geopolitics plays a central role in Azerbaijan's strategic autonomy. Control over hydrocarbon exports enhances bargaining leverage vis-à-vis both Russia and the European Union. Energy wealth, however, presents a dual effect. As Keohane and Nye (1977) argue in complex interdependence theory, interdependence may both empower and constrain [5].

Azerbaijan leveraged BTC, TANAP, and TAP pipelines to integrate into European energy architecture. This integration diversified alliances and reduced vulnerability to unilateral pressure. The Armenian diaspora functions as a geopolitical multiplier. Transnational lobbying networks influence Western policy discourse. Diaspora-driven diplomacy constitutes a distinct form of transfer geopolitics. Rather than relying solely on domestic resources, geopolitical positioning is amplified externally. Historical memory—particularly events of 1915—plays a mobilizing role in diaspora engagement. This creates normative framing in Western capitals. Georgia's geopolitical identity is constructed around transit centrality. As a corridor connecting Europe with Central Asia and the Caspian basin, Georgia positions itself as a competitive corridor rather than a passive buffer. However, unresolved territorial disputes (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) demonstrate post-imperial fragmentation dynamics.

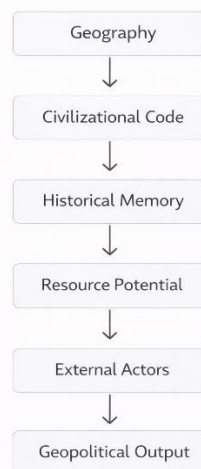


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Small State Geopolitical Behavior

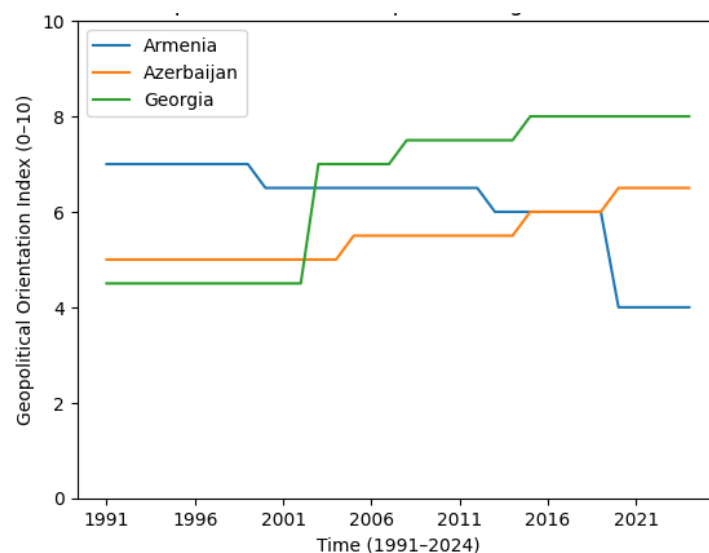
Figure 1 synthesizes the core analytical argument of this study by illustrating the interactive rather than linear relationship between structural constraints and elastic determinants. The model demonstrates that geography establishes the strategic environment within which small states operate, yet it does not predetermine outcomes. Instead, identity narratives, historical memory activation, resource capacity, and patronage structures mediate systemic pressures in differentiated ways.

This interaction produces distinct geopolitical configurations across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, confirming that small-state behavior in the South Caucasus cannot be reduced to deterministic structural logic. The model therefore provides the conceptual foundation for the broader conclusions advanced below.

Geopolitical Alignment Dynamics (1991–2024)

To operationalize geopolitical volatility and longitudinal alignment shifts in the South Caucasus, this study introduces a conceptual **Geopolitical Orientation Index (GOI)** measured on a 0–10 scale. The index does not represent a purely quantitative dataset, but a structured analytical instrument designed to capture directional foreign policy orientation over time. Higher values indicate stronger integration with Western and Euro-Atlantic structures, while lower values reflect closer alignment with Russia-centered security and institutional frameworks. The GOI aggregates five dimensions: (1) formal security alignment, (2) economic integration patterns, (3) participation in Western or Eurasian institutions, (4) diplomatic voting congruence in international organizations, and (5) elite-level foreign policy discourse. Each dimension contributes proportionally to the composite score, allowing for cross-temporal comparison from 1991 to 2024.

The purpose of the GOI is not to produce deterministic measurement but to visualize relative strategic movement and volatility. By applying a longitudinal perspective, the index highlights three distinct trajectories: Armenia’s Russia-centric orientation followed by post-2020 reorientation toward the West; Azerbaijan’s gradual consolidation of energy-based strategic autonomy; and Georgia’s accelerated Euro-Atlantic alignment after 2003. The index therefore functions as an analytical bridge between structural constraints and adaptive agency, illustrating that small states exhibit differentiated patterns of alignment despite comparable systemic pressures.



Graph 1. Post-1991 Geopolitical Alignment Shifts (1991–2024)

Source: Author’s conceptual operationalization based on comparative foreign policy alignment patterns, security partnerships, institutional integration, and strategic discourse analysis (1991–2024).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the geopolitics of small states through the case of the South Caucasus, arguing that small-state behavior cannot be adequately explained by structural realism alone. While systemic constraints imposed by great powers remain significant, they do not determine uniform outcomes among structurally comparable states. Instead, geopolitical behavior in the region emerges from the interaction between structural constants and elastic determinants.

Geography functions as a structural constant: landlocked status, transit exposure, and proximity to major powers impose enduring constraints. However, identity narratives, historical memory activation,

resource endowment, and external patronage operate as elastic variables that mediate these constraints in differentiated ways. The comparative analysis demonstrates that similar structural starting points produced divergent trajectories in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Azerbaijan illustrates a model of resource-based strategic autonomy, where hydrocarbon leverage expands bargaining capacity and diversifies alliance options. Armenia reflects a pattern conceptualized here as transfer geopolitics, in which geopolitical positioning is partially externalized through diaspora networks and patron advocacy. Georgia represents a transit-geopolitical model, relying on institutional alignment and corridor centrality to enhance strategic relevance.

The findings suggest that small states are neither passive geopolitical objects nor fully autonomous actors. Rather, they operate as adaptive strategic agents embedded in asymmetric alliance structures. Their capacity for maneuvering depends on how effectively elastic variables are mobilized within systemic constraints.

The South Caucasus therefore constitutes a nonlinear subregional model of small-state geopolitics. It demonstrates that post-imperial fragmentation, ethno-confessional heterogeneity, and identity elasticity can override purely geographical determinism. Universal small-state generalizations fail to capture this complexity.

The article contributes theoretically by integrating structural realism with small-state agency theory and conceptually introducing transfer geopolitics as a differentiated alignment pattern. Methodologically, it demonstrates the analytical value of structured comparative design in isolating elastic determinants of geopolitical behavior.

Future research should further operationalize the Geopolitical Orientation Index and expand comparative testing beyond the South Caucasus to evaluate the broader applicability of the proposed framework.

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