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**The Ideology of Neo-Ottomanism and Regional Security
of the South Caucasus Countries¹**

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Abstract

Neo-Ottomanism is an intellectual and ideological doctrine of modern Turkish foreign policy, which is related to the role and interests of Turkey in expanding its political, economic, and cultural influence in regions that were historically associated with the Ottoman Empire. Neo-Ottomanism has become particularly relevant in the 21st century, as Turkey has begun to reconsider its foreign policy priorities in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and regions of the former Ottoman Empire.

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Neo-Ottomanism emphasizes linguistic, cultural, and religious ties with the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as with former Ottoman territories. It challenges the Western orientation of foreign policy during the Republican and early Cold War periods. It is perceived as a paradigm shift from earlier foreign policies.

Neo-Ottomanism, as one of the central elements of the foreign policy of the modern Turkish state, aims to strengthen Ankara's influence in regions that are historically, culturally, or economically linked to the Ottoman Empire.

Central among these regions is the South Caucasus, a region that is a strategic transit corridor for energy resources, a military-geopolitical platform, and a competitive space between Russia and Turkey.

Keywords: Turkey, neo-Ottomanism, South Caucasus, regional security.

Introduction

Neo-Ottomanism is a set of attempts to transform Turkey's strategic identity, which is simultaneously an activation of history, an expansion of political-military influence, and an establishment of a global position. Its multifaceted nature means that neo-Ottomanism will in the future be one of the central concepts in Turkish foreign policy - especially in regions where the Ottoman legacy still represents an important cultural and political resource.

Neo-Ottomanism is not just a romanticization of history, it is part of Turkey's modern state strategy, which combines cultural identity, geopolitical interests, and economic ambitions. Although this approach often provokes contradictory reactions, it is evident in both Turkey's domestic politics and its foreign policy. It is not just an ide-

ological concept, it is a real foreign policy instrument that has a wide-ranging impact on military cooperation, energy policy, economic integration, regional alliances, and the mechanism of “soft power.”

One of the regions of particular importance for the idea of neo-Ottomanism is the South Caucasus. This region is strategically considered as a space where historical, political, and cultural ties intersect. That is why neo-Ottomanist aspirations consider the South Caucasus to be one of the main arenas for strengthening their influence and creating a new geopolitical reality in the region.

The South Caucasus - Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan - is one of the most dynamic and conflict-ridden regions of geopolitical importance in the modern world. The region is a crossroads of geopolitical interests of the East and the West, involving both regional powers - Russia, Turkey, Iran - and global actors, the European Union and the United States. The security environment in this multipolar space is rapidly changing, and the foreign policy choices of states often depend on the interests of external powers and the distribution of power. Over the past two decades, the growth of Turkey's influence in the region has become particularly noticeable. The country's foreign policy, whose intellectual basis is "neo-Ottomanism", aims to achieve regional leadership based on historical, cultural and geostrategic factors (Menderes, 2019:55-79).

Turkey's enhanced role in the South Caucasus creates both development opportunities and significant risks and challenges – security imbalance, the threat of regional destabilization, the overloading of military-political alliances and the growth of international dependencies.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the impact of neo-Ottomanism on the security of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan - whether it

promotes stabilization and economic growth or, on the contrary, creates new conflict hotspots.

The paper is aimed at studying the security environment of the countries of the South Caucasus region in order to determine the real impact, regional trends, risks, changes in the balance of power and Future prospects in the event of the possible establishment of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy.

Research objective

The aim of the research is to study the impact of modern Turkish foreign policy - neo-Ottomanism - on the regional security system of the countries of the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). Let's consider what strategic priorities Turkey has in the region, how the balance of power is changing and what opportunities and risks the new reality creates.

Research object

Regional security in the South Caucasus, its main actors and the dynamics of the balance of power.

Research subject

Neo-Ottomanism as a Turkish foreign policy strategy and its impact on the regional security of the South Caucasus countries.

Hypothesis

Neo-Ottomanism significantly transforms the security environment of the South Caucasus countries - it strengthens the positions of Azerbaijan and Georgia, reduces Russia's influence in the region, and at the same time creates new threats and challenges for Armenia and regional stability as a whole.

Research questions

1. What are the main ideas, principles, and strategic goals of neo-Ottomanism?

2. How does Turkey's neo-Ottoman policy affect the security of the South Caucasus region?
3. Does neo-Ottomanism create a new model of unified regional security?

Research methods

The paper uses several research methods that complement each other and together help us understand how neo-Ottomanism affects the security of the South Caucasus region. In particular, we have used qualitative research methods, such as: documentary analysis method; data collection method; historical-non-literary research method; comparative analysis method; case study.

Results

The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis put forward and showed that neo-Ottomanism significantly increased Turkey's role in the regional security of the South Caucasus. This influence was especially manifested in the military support of Azerbaijan in the second Karabakh war of 2020, as well as through energy and transit projects, which made Azerbaijan one of the leading regional powers and strengthened its strategic alliance with Turkey.

These processes put Armenia in a more difficult security environment and changed the balance of power in the region against it. For Georgia, the influence of neo-Ottomanism created both opportunities - in terms of energy cooperation - and security risks associated with Russian-Turkish competition and regional tensions.

Discussion

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) was a political entity spanning several continents, with both a military-administrative hierarchy and soft forms of cultural integration among its constituent peoples. For six centuries, it was one of the largest and most multi-ethnic states. The Kemalist republican reforms that emerged after its collapse

laid the foundation for a completely different state consciousness - secularism, Westernization, and national unity, which rejected Ottoman traditions. In parallel with the political and military weakening of the Ottoman Empire, in response to pressure from European powers, three ideological doctrines emerged in the empire in the 19th century - Ottomanism, Islamism, and Pan-Turkism. The main goal of each of them was to preserve the unity of the empire.

"Ottomanism" was the first ideological and political doctrine developed within the ruling circles of the Ottoman Empire, aiming to preserve the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. "Ottomanism" implied multicultural citizenship within a constitutionally and territorially constituted Ottoman state, attempting to preserve the empire's cosmopolitan heterogeneity, but with the aim of territorially limiting it.

"Pan-Islamism" was a political and ideological movement that aimed to unite the world's Muslim community, not necessarily in a single state, but around a single, political, cultural or religious unity.

"Pan-Turkism" was oriented towards the unification of ethnically and linguistically related Turkic peoples and aimed to establish a common identity and political unity (Landau, 1995:45-70). It was more of an idealistic, cultural-national project than a practical state strategy, which is why in the 20th century, especially after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its actual implementation was significantly weakened.

In the 21st century, neo-Ottomanism took shape in Turkish foreign policy - a broader and more practical concept, no longer based solely on ethnic unity. It encompasses geopolitical, economic, and security interests and aims to strengthen Turkey's regional influence in the historical Ottoman spaces within a modern state strategic framework.

Pan-Turkism can be considered one of the historical foundations of neo-Ottomanism, but not its direct predecessor. Neo-Ottomanism is a more flexible and geopolitically realistic doctrine that goes beyond ethnic unity and is focused on strengthening regional influence. Neo-Ottomanism has been developing since the 1990s and is associated with the end of the Cold War, globalization, and Turkey's economic strengthening. These processes have allowed Turkey to redefine its role in Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East, as a result of which neo-Ottomanism has emerged as a post-Cold War foreign policy.

Turkey has pursued a more active and effective policy than before. "Turkey has become a leader where it previously played a minor role" (Gachechiladze, 2019:121). The main task of its foreign policy has been to strengthen its political influence in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the post-Soviet space in general, which has remained an unchanged priority despite the changes in government.

After the Cold War, Turkey's foreign policy was significantly influenced by the period starting in 1983, when Turgut Özal and the "Motherland Party" (ANAP) came to power. Economic liberalization, Western integration, and increased regional activity were implemented. Özal saw Turkey as an axis state – a bridge between the West and the East, and economic reforms, diplomacy in Central Asia, and the cultural use of the Ottoman heritage formed the basis of his "soft power" strategy.

Özal emphasized Turkish identity and elements of Muslim culture, creating a basis for influence in the region, and combining economic, cultural, and historical characteristics. Özal saw Turkey not only as a member of the Western or Eastern bloc, but also as a political, economic, and cultural bridge that could influence the regions around it. "Özal believed that Turkey should become a bridge conn-

ecting the Islamic world with the Western world, which would facilitate the development of economic cooperation and make a significant contribution to strengthening peace both in the region and around the world” (Machitidze, 2024:258). During Ozal’s time, Turkey was formally an ally of the West, but in practice it was embarking on an active mediation policy based on the principle of a unified region. Ozal’s policy foresaw how Turkey’s influence within the Ottoman legacy would develop in the 21st century.

Although neo-Ottomanism did not exist as an official doctrine during Ozal’s rule, Turkey’s neo-Ottomanist policy since the 2000s has largely been based on the structural foundation he created. It was on this legacy that Erdoğan and the AKP built the official course of neo-Ottomanism, which strengthened the Ottoman and Islamic Heritage Use, Active Foreign Policy, and Turkey’s Role as a Mediator between the West and the Islamic World (Sengupta, 2014, p.88).

In this process, it became clear that Turkey needed a strategic framework that would not only present it as an active player in the region, but also provide depth for geopolitical decisions. This need was addressed by Ahmet Davutoğlu’s concept of “strategic depth,” which shows how Turkey can use its geographical location, historical experience, and cultural ties to enhance its influence in the region and beyond.

Davutoğlu’s “strategic depth” is based on Turkey’s geographical and historical depth, which connects the country to many geopolitical realities. In his view, this depth allows Turkey to abandon its peripheral role, become a central state, and shape its own foreign policy paradigm (Davutoğlu, 2001:191).

Davutoğlu’s portrayal of Turkey as a geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural center created the perception that he was developing neo-Ottomanist foreign policy visions. His concept was based

on Turkey's diverse identity, Muslim subjectivity, and the need for engagement in the Middle East, which was reflected in an emphasis on a common identity, a unique understanding of secularism, and an ambivalent attitude toward the West. In this vision, he presented Turkey as the central state of the "Afro-Eurasian" space, which uses its diverse identity and Ottoman heritage as a foreign policy resource.

The practical manifestation of this global and regional vision has become particularly visible in the South Caucasus - a space that is simultaneously a region of historical, geopolitical and strategic importance for Turkey.

The South Caucasus region is one of the most complex regions in the wider Eurasian space in terms of geopolitical context, where the interests of local and external powers intersect in many ways. The region has historically been characterized by the competition of various empires, cultures and security architectures - from Ottoman and Iranian influences to Soviet domination and the power vacuum following its collapse. This historical environment creates the prerequisites for considering the contemporary international relations of the South Caucasus in connection with broader regional and global processes.

After 1991, the independence of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the growing importance of ethnic conflicts, energy routes and geopolitical orientations, made the South Caucasus a strategic space for Russia, Turkey, Iran, the European Union and the US-East. In this multipolar environment, each actor pursued its own interests through economic, political and military instruments, among which the role of Turkey is particularly prominent.

In the South Caucasus, Turkey is a strategic economic partner and supporter of Western integration for Georgia, a military and political ally for Azerbaijan, and a neighbour burdened with historical

grievances for Armenia. In this context, Georgian-Turkish relations are emerging as one of the most important components of regional geopolitics, especially in the post-Soviet period, when Turkey was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic and strategic partnership with Tbilisi. “After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new stage began in Turkish-Georgian relations. In particular, on July 30, 1992, the two states signed the “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighbourly Relations”, which began a completely new period in the life of the two countries” (Makaradze, 2019, p.95). Geographical location and energy transit give Georgian-Turkish relations a special strategic importance. As we have noted, for Georgia, Turkey is a key partner for integration with the West and security, and for Solo Turket - a key country in the Black Sea-Caspian energy corridor. At the same time, regional dynamics and the interests of external powers make these relations both an opportunity and a challenge. Georgia’s high trade and investment dependence on Turkey creates systemic risks for Georgia and increases the potential for political influence, especially in areas where Ankara and Tbilisi’s interests overlap or diverge. This circumstance constantly forces Georgia to maintain a careful balance of interests in the face of regional tensions.

One of the most complex and historically charged areas in the South Caucasus region is Armenian-Turkish relations. Despite the geographical proximity, there are no diplomatic relations: in 1993, Turkey closed the border with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan in the wake of the First Karabakh War. This situation has practically stopped political dialogue for years and has significantly affected the prospects for regional stability and cooperation.

The basis of the tension in Armenian-Turkish relations lies in the mutually exclusive interpretations of the events of 1915: Armenia recognizes them as genocide, while Turkey rejects this assessment and

considers them in the military-political context of the Ottoman Empire and the First World War, which leads to a deep crisis of trust and delays in diplomatic dialogue. This historical contradiction is exacerbated by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Turkey's active support for Azerbaijan, especially during the second Karabakh war of 2020. Armenia's security dependence on Russia and Turkey's growing role in the region create a complex geopolitical context where the normalization of security relations is hindered by historical memory, regional competition, and a lack of political trust.

Due to political and economic factors, numerous attempts have been made to normalize Armenian-Turkish relations - from initiatives in the 1990s to the "Zurich Protocols" of 2008-2009, partial diplomacy in the 2010s², and a renewed dialogue starting in 2021.

The second Karabakh war of 2020 and the shift in the balance of power in the region forced Armenia to reconsider its security strategy, as a result of which the restoration of relations with Turkey became an economic and security necessity. Armenia is trying to achieve tactical normalization - reducing regional isolation, opening transport and trade routes, and gradually restoring diplomatic channels. Although Turkey remains a problematic security actor for Armenia due to its support for Azerbaijan, it is at the same time perceived as a geostrategic, indirect partner.

One of the most stable and deep strategic alliances in modern regional politics is the Azerbaijani-Turkish relationship. Its basis is ethnolinguistic proximity, convergence of security interests and energy cooperation. Although state relations were formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, their historical and cultural roots go back much earlier. In 1991, Turkey was one of the first to recognize the

² Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Turkey and The Republic of Armenia, Zurich, October, 2009

independence of Azerbaijan, which quickly established political, economic and military partnership. "Since the 1990s, when the energy routes lobbied by the United States in the South Caucasus began to be realized, it seemed that the role of Azerbaijan was determined, which it continues to play to this day" (Manchkhshvili, 2018:73). It is precisely energy projects that have become the main pillar of the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline has allowed Azerbaijan to connect to the North Atlantic market bypassing Russia and Iran since 2006; the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline has been the main export route for Azerbaijani gas to Turkey since 2007; and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) is the basis for Azerbaijan's increased involvement in the energy systems of Southern Europe. These projects have created geo-economic integration, which has shaped a new reality of energy security in the region.

Since the 1990s, Turkey has systematically provided Azerbaijan with military-technical, tactical and political support, which is reflected in joint exercises, officer training and technological cooperation. Turkey sided with Azerbaijan both in the First Karabakh War and in the Second War of 2020, when Bayraktar TB 2 unmanned systems and military consultations significantly strengthened Azerbaijan's operational capabilities. After the war, the "Shusha Declaration" signed in Shesha on June 15, 2021³ expanded military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation between the two countries. This strong alliance, based on a common identity and interests, allows them to often take joint positions on the international stage, and "the disagreements that have arisen between Azerbaijan and Armenia regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, which is part of Azerbaijan, are a determining factor in Turkey's relations with these countries" (Beridze, 2019:85).

³ Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, 2021.

In the post-war period, Azerbaijan and Turkey have been actively trying to open the transport “Zangezur Corridor” connecting Western Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, which is in Ankara’s strategic interest in strengthening its transport dominance in the South Caucasus.

The Azerbaijani-Turkish relationship is a unique political phenomenon, where historical identity, energy strategy, military-security alliance and common goals aimed at regional influence combine to create one of the most stable and dynamic partnerships in the world. This relationship continues to deepen, as a result of which the balance of power in the South Caucasus is increasingly shaped by the joint strategic actions of Baku and Ankara.

Conclusion

Thus, Turkey’s relations with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus represent a multidimensional, asymmetric and strategically distinct system, combining historical heritage and modern geopolitical realities. Despite the different goals in each direction, these relations are developing into a unified regional strategy, which aims to strengthen Ankara's positions as a transport hub, an energy security actor and an influential force in regional security, therefore, "with its economic capabilities and already operating or implemented energy projects, Turkey has received real opportunities to increase its influence in the South Caucasus region" (Kopaliani, 2025:218). Turkey's policy applies differently to all three states - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, although ultimately it serves to strengthen Ankara's regional influence.

Turkey has the deepest and most institutionally consolidated cooperation in political and economic terms with Azerbaijan. "One nation, two states" - a partnership that emerged on a common ethno-cultural foundation - has turned into a strategic-military alliance, esp-

ecially after the 2020 war, with the signing of the "Shusha Declaration", the formal nature of cooperation was completed and it turned into a strong regional-political alliance. The joint network of energy infrastructure - BTC, BTE, TANAP - strengthens Turkey's position as the central energy corridor between the Caspian and Europe, and gives Azerbaijan the opportunity to implement a multi-vector independent foreign policy. In this regard, Baku-Ankara relations are the most solid pillar of the regional architecture. At the same time, "the choice of Turkey as the main political partner for Azerbaijan is a pragmatic and well-calculated move... Turkey is a NATO member state. Thus, Azerbaijan is approaching the NATO space and is in partnership with it" (Beridze, 2018:95).

Georgia in Turkey's foreign policy represents a critically important transport and logistics space, where cooperation is built on pragmatic interests, economic integration and interdependence in the security sphere. For Turkey, Georgia is a geographical artery of energy corridors, which gives Tbilisi the function of a "strategic conduit" and at the same time strengthens its Western integration course. Although Georgia is not as close a partner as Azerbaijan in terms of ethnocultural or political identity, Ankara-Tbilisi relations are characterized by stability and mutually beneficial realistic platforms.

The most complex and limited direction remains the Armenian-Turkish relationship, where historical memory, the events of 1915, the complicated Armenian-Turkish political dialogue, and Turkey's clear positioning in favour of Azerbaijan in the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict create a long-term barrier to full normalization. Despite the "Zurich Protocols" and the new normalization efforts that began after 2021, progress in the process has been extremely slow and conditional. Turkey's attitude towards Armenia is largely determined by its strategic partnership with Baku, which places this relationship

within the framework of a regional, trilateral relationship configuration, where Armenia remains an actor with limited geopolitical capabilities. Overall, Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus can be described as a system of strategic asymmetry, with Azerbaijan as the pivot and strategic "brother"; Georgia as a transit platform and stable partner; and Armenia as a complicated but potentially transformative direction, the normalization of which depends on the transformation of the regional balance of power.

An approach based on this different relationship allows Turkey to shape a multifaceted configuration of regional influence that combines energy, military cooperation, and economic interdependence. As a result, Turkey is increasingly establishing itself as one of the main external forces determining the dynamics of stability and strategic development in the South Caucasus.

If Turkey's foreign policy course becomes "neo-Ottomanist" and this ideology is strengthened to the level of state policy, it will be able to use such forms of power perception and foreign policy establishment incentives that will have a systemic impact on the South Caucasus and significantly transform the existing balance of power.

The strengthening of neo-Ottomanism will directly affect the security of Azerbaijan, of course, its position in the region will be strengthened, however, Azerbaijan will become even more sharply strategic dependent on Turkey, which will be expressed in a more acute confrontation of its neighbourhood policy and relations with Iran or Russia, security will increase, but freedom of strategic manoeuvre will decrease.

The strengthening of neo-Ottomanism in relation to Georgia may be determined by a double result: positive and negative. Security with stable transit prices, as well as increased pressure -. Turkey will become even more interested in preserving the territorial integrity of

Georgia, since Georgia remains the main conduit for all energy and transport projects. Economic engagement will strengthen, Tbilisi will become an even more important regional hub. Along with the positive effects, there are also risks, namely, Georgia will have to choose more sharply the balance of power between the West and Turkey, as Ankara's growing self-establishment in the region will give it more leverage; Georgian policy will for some time turn from an "independent variable" of the geopolitical context into a "dependent variable" because the transit status will entail restrictions on foreign policy choices. The growth of neo-Ottomanism may also lead to the expansion of its cultural-ideological influence, which will create new axes of polarization in the Georgian public agenda.

Armenia is the country whose security will be most negatively affected by neo-Ottomanism. Turkey's policy will be even more sharply tied to coordination with Azerbaijan, which will reduce Armenia's strategic position to the level of a weak point. The strengthening of Turkish ideology against the backdrop of the historical memory of 1915 will deepen the psychological security crisis in Armenian society. For Armenia, there is only one relatively easy option: if Turkey includes the neo-Ottomanist discourse in the normalization process as a means of demonstrating its leading regional role, some pragmatic opening may also emerge, although this scenario is unlikely, since Ankara will conduct its policy towards Yerevan in coordination with Azerbaijan.

From a general regional perspective, the possible strengthening of neo-Ottoman ideology in Turkish foreign policy will make the security architecture of the South Caucasus more polarized, more dependent on the Turkish-Azerbaijani bloc, focused on control of transport and military corridors, and increasingly dependent on the pace of Ankara's political narrative, which will lead to a joint Turkish-

Azerbaijani center of power, Georgia becoming a necessary but vulnerable link of stability, and Armenia even more isolated in a regime of constant security stress.

Thus, the strengthening of neo-Ottomanism in the South Caucasus will lead to a transition from a multilateral security model to a system built on a more sharply bloc-based, asymmetric, and political pyramids of influence, where Ankara's role will be dominant, and the countries of the region will be in varying degrees of dependence. The possible establishment of neo-Ottomanism in terms of Turkish foreign policy will have both a stabilizing and a destabilizing impact on the security architecture of the South Caucasus. The growth of Turkey's economic and military power will provide the region with development opportunities, but at the same time it will create new geopolitical tensions. In the future, regional security will depend on the change in the power dynamics between Ankara, Moscow and Brussels, as well as on the ability of the South Caucasus countries to balance their strategic interests. In short, "the events in Turkey, including the first decade of the 21st century, have shown us that the country is developing into a strong state, which allows us to conclude that it will not let go of the success it has achieved and will intensify both its domestic and foreign policies in the future" (Makaradze, 2019, p.29).

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