

U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: TAKE THREE

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The United States has important but not vital interests in the South Caucasus, which include preserving regional stability; preventing the resumption of frozen conflicts; and supporting democratic change and better governance as well as the international integration of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Recent events—the breakdown of the post-Cold War European security order, changing global energy markets, instability to the region’s south, a new U.S. administration, and the European Union’s (EU) internal challenges—call for sustained U.S. engagement to advance those interests.

U.S. Engagement in the South Caucasus

- Over the past twenty-five years, U.S. involvement in the South Caucasus has helped produce important positive changes in the region, particularly in Georgia. However, some U.S.-supported initiatives proved too ambitious because they underestimated the challenges facing the South Caucasus states and lacked adequate resources.
- U.S. policy will continue to face limited resources and challenging conditions in the region. Washington should stay engaged to help the South Caucasus states tackle their internal challenges. But U.S. policy in the region cannot change its environment, and will have to contend with Russia’s dominant position and its opposition to U.S. engagement there.
- The United States cannot retreat from the South Caucasus. But success will depend on a careful balancing of U.S. commitments and resources, as well as a clear appreciation of the limits on U.S. capacity to promote transformational change.

A Long-Term U.S. Approach

A more sustainable policy toward the region should be based on five guiding principles:

Prioritize conflict prevention. Keeping any one of the region’s frozen conflicts from escalating into hostilities should remain the top priority for U.S. policy toward the South Caucasus.

Proceed cautiously in promoting U.S. values. The United States should support democratic change; however, a single regional approach is unlikely to be effective given the different trajectories of the South Caucasus states. Tailored, country-specific approaches to achieve incremental progress offer the best prospect for success.

Keep expectations modest. The United States is at a serious geopolitical disadvantage in the region vis-à-vis Russia. Washington should not promise support to counterbalance Moscow that it cannot deliver. This is especially the case with Georgia and its aspirations for NATO membership.

Make room for the EU. Economic development, rule of law, and other domestic reforms should remain priorities for U.S. engagement, but Washington should coordinate its efforts with the EU.

Be realistic about energy potential. The significance of Caspian Sea energy resources for the region in the past has created unrealistic expectations, which are important to keep in check.

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