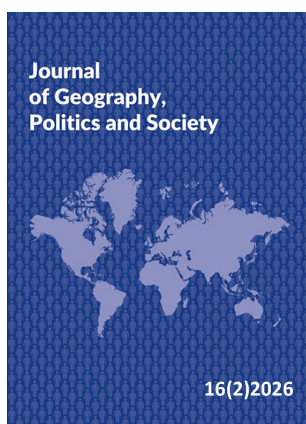




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INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES IN THE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT OF TRANSIT FLOWS IN THE CONTEXT OF CAUCASUS REGIONAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This article argues that regionalism in the Caucasus should be examined both on its own terms and within a broader geopolitical framework encompassing Central Asia and the “Greater Middle East”. The aim of the article is to examine international practices in the public management of transit flows in the context of Caucasus regionalism. Its scientific contribution lies in highlighting the need to reconcile the divergent geopolitical interests of the major powers and of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia through international cooperation. International practices in the public management of transit flows are closely linked to the international legal regulation of interstate relations. However, such regulation remains largely formal in an international environment increasingly shaped by military force, even though international law is intended to support the stability of the international system. The system of international relations in the 2020s is undergoing a chaotic transition. The article further argues that the Russian part of the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus form part of the broader geopolitical space of the Black Sea–Caspian region, which constitutes a transit zone linking Central Asia to China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Key words

Greater Middle East, Central Asia, Caucasus, public management of transit flows, international public administration practices.

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1. Introduction

International public administration practices are associated with the operation of universal, regional, and specialized international organizations whose

activities seek to introduce elements of order into the otherwise anarchic international system. The interplay between order and chaos is characteristic of different stages in the evolution of social systems, regardless of whether these systems are analyzed

through the lens of synergetics or another theoretical approach.

This article examines such practices from the perspective of political realism, which understands international relations as a continuous struggle among states for power, security, and the advancement of national interests in an anarchic international environment. After the end of the Cold War, it appeared that the values of freedom, democracy, and human rights were becoming universal and irreversible. The global economic crisis that began in 2008 marked a transition between historical eras. From an idealist perspective, economic interdependence is assumed to reduce the likelihood of war between states.

2. Conceptual Review

Free trade contributed to more peaceful interstate relations and expanded access to lower-cost goods across markets. Large companies were able to operate globally with relatively limited consideration of national-security constraints or the resilience of their own supply chains.

Transport and transit are central components of globalization. After the end of the Cold War, the United States provided important security guarantees for global transit flows and acted as a principal guarantor of international trade. Contemporary technologically advanced production depends on the unhindered cross-border movement of numerous intermediate goods.

Modern container shipping is embedded in complex global value chains rather than merely transporting a single product from one port to another. Without the US security role, long-distance maritime transport would be more vulnerable and could become the exception rather than the norm. Globalization therefore depends on mechanisms that provide security and an arbiter for international exchange.

Disruption of maritime routes adversely affects energy supplies, manufacturing, and agriculture. In this sense, transportation functions as the connective tissue of the global economy. The war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran (February 28–June 19, 2026) provided Iran with grounds to consider imposing charges on tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz. Indonesia and Singapore viewed this as a possible precedent for charging vessels passing through the Strait of Malacca, an issue of particular concern to China. Access from the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean may also be affected by India's strategic position in the Andaman Islands.

3. Literature Review

The 2020s have been marked by a profound transformation of both global and regional geopolitics. This transformation reflects the renewed competition among major powers, including the United States, China, the Russian Federation, India, the European Union, and Japan, as well as the increasing priority given to military-political instruments of influence. The current phase of this process can be traced back to the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, after which Washington attempted to implement a strategy for creating a democratic "Greater Middle East", conceived as a zone of turbulence in the Islamic world stretching from North Africa through the Middle East to Central Asia (Salem, 2008).

The project of constructing a democratic "Greater Middle East" was not realized. A turning point came with the Arab Spring of 2011, which in most Arab states ultimately resulted in the persistence of authoritarian personalist regimes (Lymar, 2022). The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 may be regarded as the final defeat of this project. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 strengthened China's influence in Central Asia and increased Beijing's leverage over the Russian Federation (Mykal, 2024). After Xi Jinping assumed China's leadership in 2013, he advanced the "One Belt, One Road" strategy, subsequently known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which combined the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "Maritime Silk Road" (Shepotylo, Nikolaieva, 2019). The United States sought to position democratic India as a counterweight to authoritarian China. India and China, by contrast, have attempted to avoid direct confrontation, particularly military confrontation, while jointly promoting the idea of an "Asian era" (Lukash, 2022). At the 2023 G20 Summit, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), linking India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Greece (Piraeus), was announced as an alternative to China's Belt and Road routes (Tyshkevych, 2025).

Before the 2026 war involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, Russia and Iran had planned to develop an alternative International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through the Caucasus and Iran to India. Turkey's "Development Path" from Central Asia through the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus is likewise significant for the region. In August 2025, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed an agreement in Washington with the United States to

involve an American operator in the management of the Zangezur transport corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), which became known as the “Trump Route” (TRIPP) (Voloshenko, 2025). Russia has also proposed that China participate in the development of a “Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor”. At present, however, the high cost of escorting vessels with nuclear-powered icebreakers makes this route less competitive than the alternatives.

4. Transit Routes

Over the past three centuries, the geopolitics of the Caucasus has largely been interpreted through the prism of Russian imperial policy (Glasheva, Beppeva, 2025). In a 2009 analytical paper entitled “Eurasia or Central Asia and the Caucasus”, V. Papava (2009), an expert at the Institute for Central Asian and Caucasus Studies at Johns Hopkins University, examined the geopolitical situation in the Caspian–Caucasus region. In 2019, Azerbaijani experts interpreted the proposal to establish a stability pact for the Caucasus as an attempt to overcome Armenia’s economic isolation. Azerbaijan’s policy was presented as a struggle for security, regional stability, and sustainable development (Tagisade, 2019).

Armenia, by contrast, found it difficult to relinquish its claims to Karabakh. Drawing on the outcome of the 2021 war over Karabakh, V. Huseynov (2023), Head of the Department of International Relations Analysis at Baku University, argued that Russia had lost its dominant role in the regional security architecture. Turkey and Iran also influence the emerging regional security system. In her study “Creating a New Regional Order: The Return of the Geopolitics of the South Caucasus”, published in November 2022, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, an expert at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, argued that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022 radically altered the balance of power in the Caucasus (Ortina, Chorny, 2025).

Studies of international public administration practices also examine relevant experience at the community level (Karsim, 2025), while other publications adopt a more forward-looking perspective, including discussions of how European public administration experience might be adapted to post-war Ukraine (Zeihan, 2025). International practices in the public management of transit flows are closely connected with the international legal

regulation of interstate relations. Yet such regulation remains largely formal in an environment increasingly dominated by military power, even though international law is intended to support the stability of the international system. The international relations system of the 2020s is undergoing a chaotic transition. In this interpretation, 2019 marked the final year of the preceding period of global economic expansion, while the era of rapid technological development and inexpensive mass production is drawing to a close. Futurist analyses suggest that the emerging world order will be more costly, slower, and more complex, with consequences for transport, finance, energy, agriculture, and production (Maistrenko, 2022).

Over the past quarter-century, Azerbaijan has developed deep strategic cooperation with Turkey (Mammadova, 2023) while simultaneously building strong strategic relations with Israel (Grasser, 2021). Armenia, by contrast, has oscillated between Russia and the West, thereby weakening Yerevan’s strategic position. On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan announced a counteroffensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, imposed martial law, and declared general mobilization. Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev denied Turkish participation in the war against Armenia and identified the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh as a condition for a ceasefire. On October 1, 2020, US President D. Trump, French President E. Macron, and Russian President V. Putin issued a joint statement calling for a ceasefire in Karabakh and a return to negotiations without preconditions.

The Azerbaijani army continued to advance across the Karabakh front. On October 27, 2020, responding to claims that Syrian mercenaries linked to Erdoğan were fighting in Karabakh, I. Aliyev accused Russia of supplying weapons to Armenia from its base in Gyumri. US efforts to secure a ceasefire were unsuccessful. At that stage, Iran’s previously assertive regional rhetoric proved more restrained in practice.

On October 28, 2020, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed support for restoring Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, while the OSCE called on the parties to refrain from attacks on civilians (De Waal, 2021). On November 8, 2020, Azerbaijan announced the capture of Shusha in Karabakh. On November 10, 2020, Azerbaijan agreed to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh for five years. A Turkish military base was planned for the Agdam region bordering Karabakh. Russia’s role as a “peacekeeper”, exercised in tandem with Turkey, remained in place until

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

In December 2023, Baku and Yerevan agreed to exchange prisoners of war and continued preparations for a peace treaty under which Armenia was expected to recognize Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. No peace treaty was concluded, however, because this required amendments to the Armenian Constitution. The United States assumed a role as a guarantor against renewed Azerbaijani–Armenian hostilities. India blocked Azerbaijan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while Pakistan blocked Armenia's accession.

Armenia's peaceful integration into the emerging regional system depended on the outcome of the parliamentary elections held on June 12, 2026. Nikol Pashinyan's party secured a majority, although not a constitutional majority. Iran subsequently emerged as a weak link in the "Greater Middle East": in January 2026, mass protests took place amid economic sanctions and widespread impoverishment. Trump accepted the view of advisers who argued that eliminating Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would be sufficient to trigger the overthrow of Iran's clerical regime.

These developments illustrate the hybrid character of US foreign policy. On the one hand, American ambitions in Latin America point toward a form of "regional isolationism"; on the other, US activity in the Middle East reflects the residual logic of a global policing role. These apparent contradictions are reconciled by a broader US meta-strategy. Trump seeks to secure dominance over oil and gas resources in order to preserve the dollar's role as a global currency, retain control over major trade routes, and reinforce military power. Other major centers of power—the European Union, China, India, and Japan—have so far responded cautiously to these changes. The European Union, in particular, lacks the collective political will necessary to position itself as an alternative to NATO.

China, for its part, has largely pursued a strategy of strategic patience. India has traditionally exercised restraint in foreign policy, partly because of its domestic contradictions, while Japan likewise remains more focused on its own security than on broader global dynamics. On February 28, 2026, Israel and the United States launched a large-scale military operation against Iran. This followed the 12-day war of June 2025, which suspended Iran's nuclear program, although objective assessments of its subsequent condition remain difficult. Iran nevertheless appeared to have restored its missile capacity and to be prepared for continued

confrontation. Opponents of the clerical regime argued that internal divisions within the Iranian leadership had created conditions under which additional external pressure might lead to regime collapse. Facing declining approval ahead of the November 3, 2026 midterm elections to the House of Representatives and the Senate, Trump had a domestic political incentive to pursue a "small victorious war" capable of consolidating public support. Expectations that the Iranian regime would collapse rapidly during the first weeks of the conflict were not fulfilled.

Iran instead adopted a strategy designed to increase the costs of the war for US allies. Iranian drone and missile strikes against the Persian Gulf emirates outnumbered comparable strikes against Israel, exposing the limitations of a US strategy centered on the aerial destruction of Iranian military infrastructure. Some observers expected a repetition of the 1999 "Yugoslav scenario", in which sustained air strikes were assumed to have caused the fall of the regime in Belgrade, but this analogy overlooked important differences. Yugoslavia lacked the capacity to retaliate against NATO bases, for example in Italy, whereas Iran was able both to respond and to escalate. Moreover, even after the bombing of Yugoslavia, NATO ground forces still had to be deployed in Kosovo.

In the Iranian case, NATO lacked unity over the war. The United Kingdom dispatched a nuclear-powered submarine to the Arabian Sea only at the end of the first month of hostilities, while France sent an aircraft carrier toward Cyprus; neither London nor Paris, however, appeared willing to expose major naval assets to Iranian attacks in a forceful attempt to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. The prospects for a ground operation were also limited.

First, Iran's mountainous borders and narrow passes would make a land operation costly. Second, the United States and Israel were unable to assemble a coalition willing to participate in a ground war. Third, a month of air strikes had already caused substantial civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. In addition, Trump's statements about "changing the geographical map of Iran" contributed to rallying Iranians around the regime. Restricting the passage of oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz became part of Iran's asymmetric warfare strategy, while any attempt to reopen the strait by force risked substantial casualties. By the end of the first month of hostilities, the conflict had entered a new phase of escalation.

Iran responded to attacks on its nuclear facilities by striking an Israeli nuclear facility, while Trump

demanded that the Strait of Hormuz be reopened and threatened further attacks on Iran's energy sector. Each additional day of the conflict imposed growing costs on the global economy. Some observers regarded this disruption as a mechanism through which petrodollar-denominated debts could be eroded and a transition toward a new digital currency system accelerated.

In this interpretation, the monetary architecture of the industrial economy had been based on the petrodollar, whereas the emerging system would rely on an "energy link unit", a concept discussed publicly at the 2026 Davos Economic Forum. The war also had geostrategic implications for Chinese logistics routes. The United States continued to support an India–Middle East–Europe route, while the conflict halted implementation of the Russian project for access to warm-water routes through the Caspian Sea and Iran to the Indian Ocean. The price of these geopolitical projects, however, has been a serious deterioration in global security. At the same time, the war with Iran brought regional cooperation among the South Caucasus states to the forefront. On February 5, 2026, an Azerbaijani court imposed life sentences on former Armenian leaders of Karabakh.

On February 11–12, 2026, US Vice President J. Vance visited Baku, where the United States announced an expanded presence in the South Caucasus. On February 28, 2026, I. Aliyev expressed condolences to Iranian President M. Pezeshkian in connection with the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

On March 5, 2026, an Iranian drone struck Nakhichevan, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the Iranian strike on Azerbaijan. On April 6, 2026, Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev visited Tbilisi, where the parties discussed security in the South Caucasus and projects for the transit of Kazakh oil and Turkmen gas. On April 15, 2026, the Russian Federation acknowledged responsibility for the downing of an Azerbaijani passenger aircraft in 2024 and paid compensation.

5. Conclusions

Under N. Pashinyan's leadership, Armenia opted for a policy oriented toward peace. Before the parliamentary election campaign, Pashinyan stated that Armenia would not enter an arms race with Azerbaijan. For the Russian Federation, Armenia has become another arena of hybrid confrontation with the West. On February 9–10, 2026, US Vice President

J. Vance visited Yerevan. The United States allocated USD 13 billion in assistance to Armenia. Georgia lost effective control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s. Its defeat in the 2008 Russian–Georgian war contributed to the subsequent rise of the Georgian Dream party.

Following Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the party stated on February 24, 2022, that Georgia would not open a "second front" against the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Georgia remains integrated into regional projects involving Azerbaijan and Armenia. The position of the South Caucasus in world politics depends both on the outcome of the war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran and on the consequences of Armenia's parliamentary elections. A hypothetical Iranian defeat could result in greater US control over energy transit routes from the Persian (Arabian) Gulf, whereas the survival of the ruling regime in Iran could alter the regional balance in a different direction.

One possible manifestation would be a coercive change in the status of the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran sought to impose charges on the transit of goods. From the perspective of international practices in transit-flow management, such a development would represent a shift toward a predominantly national management regime, a trend that would be difficult to reconcile with international law.

Under the rules of international maritime law in force before the outbreak of war on February 28, 2026, the Strait of Hormuz was governed by an international legal regime of transit passage. From this perspective, the war produced the opposite of its intended effect: rather than bringing about regime change in Iran, it increased the risk of nuclear confrontation, with harmful consequences not only for the Caucasus but for the international system as a whole.

6. Recommendations

If the conflict involving Iran is de-escalated, opportunities may emerge for the operation of the Zangezur (Syunik) transport corridor, with significant implications for regional geopolitics. Turkey would gain a land connection to Central Asia, while the broader Greater Turan project would remain at odds with the geopolitical interests of Russia and China. Consequently, the corridor could become an additional source of tension in US–China relations.

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