

Citation List: Balcı, A. (2026). At the heart of the triangle: Analyzing leader-level diplomacy in the South Caucasus and its regional power dynamics. In Ş. Aktürk & A. Balcı (Eds.), *Azerbaijan and Türkiye in world politics* (pp. 227-243). Turkish Academy of Sciences Publications.

CHAPTER 15

AT THE HEART OF THE TRIANGLE: ANALYZING LEADER-LEVEL DIPLOMACY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND ITS REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS

Ali BALCI

**AT THE HEART OF THE TRIANGLE:
ANALYZING LEADER-LEVEL DIPLOMACY IN THE SOUTH
CAUCASUS AND ITS REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS**

Ali BALCI
Sakarya University

Abstract

This paper investigates the evolving diplomatic relationships between the three South Caucasian countries-Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia-and their regional neighbors-Türkiye, Russia, and Iran-through the lens of high-level leader visits from 1991 to the early 2020s. Departing from traditional emphases on energy infrastructure and territorial conflicts, this study adopts leader-level visits as a proxy for understanding geopolitical alignments and foreign policy priorities. Drawing on original and global datasets, the analysis reveals significant asymmetries in engagement patterns: Azerbaijan emerges as the most diplomatically active and strategically balanced state, while Armenia and Georgia exhibit more selective regional alignments. The paper also highlights how broader regional dynamics, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, have shaped visit patterns.

Keywords

Leader Visits, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Russia

Introduction

In the 1990s, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran were portrayed as regional power rivals in the emerging post-Soviet Eurasian landscape (Rubinstein & Smolansky, 1995; Criss & Güner, 1999). Nearly two decades later, scholars began to conceptualize the shifting regional order through the lens of the “Türkiye–Russia–Iran Nexus” (Flanagan, 2013; Mesbahi, 2010; Hamre, 2013). In the 2020s, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward the Middle East to explore the Eurasian rivalries among these powers (Balci & Monceau, 2021). At the same time, other researchers have highlighted the South Caucasus as a key site where the interactions and rivalries among these three states become visible (Isachenko, 2023). This trilateral rivalry has remained a central theme in both public discourse and academic debates on post-Cold War regional politics for over three decades. At the heart of this strategic triangle lies the South Caucasus, composed of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. While Azerbaijan is the only country that shares borders with all three regional powers, both Armenia and Georgia play significant roles in shaping the regional balance—particularly in relation to infrastructure projects such as oil and gas pipelines. Armenia, though landlocked and surrounded by Türkiye, Iran, and Azerbaijan, remains deeply entangled in the region’s geopolitical fault lines. Georgia, bordering its former imperial power Russia, has pursued an independent foreign policy largely enabled by its close alignment with Türkiye.

This paper examines the evolving relationships between the three South Caucasian countries—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—and the three regional powers surrounding them—Türkiye, Russia, and Iran—by analyzing high-level diplomatic visits from 1991, the year the Caucasian states gained independence, through the early 2020s. Existing literature on the region has primarily focused on infrastructure projects, such as energy pipelines (Kardas, 2011; Ersen & Çelikpala, 2019) and the Belt and Road Initiative (Sahakyan & Lo, 2025), or on territorial conflicts including Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, to understand the geopolitical dynamics at play (Kasım, 2001). This paper proposes an alternative approach by analyzing leader-level interactions among these six countries to reveal underlying geopolitical patterns and shifts over time. The use of high-level diplomatic visits as indicators of international alignment and strategic priorities has precedent in the literature. In the 1970s, scholars such as Hughes and Volgy (1970) and Thompson (1970) employed visit frequency data to study regional dynamics in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, respectively. Kastner and Saunders (2012) investigated the travel patterns of Chinese leaders to assess whether Beijing was positioning itself in opposition to the U.S.-led international order. Similarly, Mesquita and Chien (2021) analyzed the foreign travel behavior of leaders from Brazil, South Africa, and Türkiye to determine whether these states function as regional powers. More recently, Ma and Kang (2023) analyzed visit patterns between Vietnam and three major powers—the United States, China, and Russia—to explore whether Vietnam is aligning more closely with the United States as a strategy to counter the perceived rise of “China fear” in Southeast Asia.

Building on available datasets that track leader-level visits among the three South Caucasian countries—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia—and their three regional neighbors—Türkiye, Russia, and Iran—, this paper analyzes high-level diplomatic interactions to interpret the nature of relations among these six states. The literature on leader visits suggests that such high-level interactions serve as reliable indicators of interstate relations and foreign policy preferences (Balci, 2024a; 2025; Balci et al., 2025). To assess the foreign policy orientations of the South Caucasian states toward the regional powers, we draw on the global leader visit dataset compiled by Moyer et al. (2025), which includes visits by heads of state and government across the world from 1990 to 2023. To evaluate the reciprocal orientation—namely, the engagement of Türkiye, Iran, and Russia with the South Caucasus—we utilize three separate datasets: Türkiye’s leader visits (Balci & Pulat, 2024; Balci, 2024c), Iran’s leader visits (Balci, 2024b), and Russia’s leader visits (Balci & Aras, 2025).

Where Do South Caucasus Leaders Travel?

This section presents two descriptive tables and one map capturing the outgoing high-level visits of South Caucasian leaders. The first table aggregates data by year and country, documenting the total number of visits made by leaders of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan from 1991 to 2023, with a specific focus on their visits to three regional powers: Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. During this period, the leaders of these three South Caucasian countries undertook a total of 716 bilateral visits-defined here as visits involving direct meetings with host country leaders. Multilateral meetings and summits where such bilateral interactions did not occur are excluded from the table. Among these 716 visits, 132 were to Russia, 60 to Türkiye, and 17 to Iran, indicating that Russia has consistently been the primary destination for regional diplomatic engagement, while Iran has attracted the fewest visits. The year 2023 marks the most diplomatically active year in terms of total visits by South Caucasian leaders. Russia received the highest number of visits in 2008 (11 visits) and 2009 (9 visits)-a trend that likely reflects intensified diplomatic engagement following Russia's military intervention in Georgia. Türkiye received its highest number of visits in 1999 (7 visits) and in 2016 and 2023 (6 visits each). Iran was visited more than once only in 2009 and 2017.

Table 1
Numbers of Caucasian Leaders' Visits by Year (Moyer et al. 2025)¹

	GEO+ARM+AZE				Georgia				Armenia				Azerbaijan			
	TOT.	RUS	TUR	IRN	TOT.	RUS	TUR	IRN	TOT.	RUS	TUR	IRN	TOT.	RUS	TUR	IRN
1991	5	1							4	1			1			
1992	7	2	2		1	1			4	1			2		2	
1993	16	7	1		4	3			8	3	1		4	1		
1994	20	3	5	1	3	1			3				14	2	5	1
1995	13	2			5	1			2	1			6			
1996	13	7		1	4	4			2	1			7	2		1
1997	16	4	1	1	2				3	2			11	2	1	1
1998	5		1		1				1				3		1	
1999	14	2	7		4				2	1	1		8	1	6	
2000	15	5	1	1	1				6	3			8	2	1	1
2001	13	2	2		1				6	1			6	1	2	
2002	15	4	1	1	1				8	1			6	3	1	1
2003	13	3	1		3	1			7	2			3		1	
2004	32	4	2	1	14	1	1	1	5	1			13	2	1	
2005	26	5		1	7	1			8	2			11	2		1
2006	32	6	2	1	10	1	1		7	3		1	15	2	1	
2007	34	5	1	1	15	1	1		4	2			15	2		1
2008	32	11	2		10	2			8	5			14	4	2	
2009	30	9	1	2	6				9	5	1	1	15	4		1
2010	30	6	3		6				14	6			10		3	

¹ The "Total" columns indicate the number of visits made to all countries worldwide and are not the sum of the visits listed in the corresponding regional columns.

2011	28	6	1		4				16	4			8	2	1	
2012	25	5	1		4				12	4			9	1	1	
2013	18	2	2	1	4		1		6	2		1	8		1	
2014	34	7	1	1	6				14	5			14	2	1	1
2015	27	3	2		9				8	3			10		2	
2016	29	6	6	1	9		2		9	5			11	1	4	1
2017	33	6	1	3	8				11	3		1	14	3	1	2
2018	12	1	1		3				7				2	1	1	
2019	30	2	2		11		1		10				9	2	1	
2020	6								3				3			
2021	20	3	1		7		1		9				4	3		
2022	33	3	3		11				3	1			19	2	3	
2023	40		6		15		2		6				19		4	
Total	716	132	60	17	189	17	10	1	225	68	3	4	302	47	47	12

When comparing the three South Caucasian countries in terms of their bilateral visits to the regional powers—Russia, Türkiye, and Iran—Armenia stands out for its strong diplomatic orientation toward Russia, having conducted 68 visits over the past three decades. In stark contrast, Armenian leaders visited Türkiye only three times and Iran four times during the same period. To put this in perspective, Armenian leaders traveled to France 22 times. They also visited Italy (6 times) and Germany (5 times) more frequently than either of their neighboring regional powers, Türkiye and Iran. Georgia likewise shows a clear diplomatic leaning toward Russia, though Türkiye occupies a notable position in Tbilisi’s foreign policy agenda. Iran remains the least-visited destination, not only among the three regional powers but globally. Georgian leaders made 17 visits to Azerbaijan, 15 to Ukraine, 13 to the United States, 12 to France, and 11 to Armenia. While Azerbaijan and Armenia are immediate neighbors, the presence of distant countries like the U.S. and France among the top destinations underscores Iran’s marginal role in Georgia’s diplomatic activity. Azerbaijan, by contrast, exhibits a much broader diplomatic reach. It maintains a balanced level of engagement with both Moscow and Ankara, having conducted 47 visits to each. While Tehran remains a less frequent destination, Azerbaijani leaders still made 12 visits to Iran, placing it among the top five destinations after France (14 visits) and Switzerland (13 visits). This indicates that, despite its relatively limited appeal regionally, Iran retains some strategic importance for Baku. Nonetheless, Türkiye and Russia clearly dominate Azerbaijan’s foreign policy landscape.

When examining the temporal fluctuations in visits to regional powers, a clear decline in Georgia’s engagement with Russia is observed following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. This shift is consistent with the broader deterioration in bilateral relations after the invasion. In the aftermath, Türkiye emerged as a relatively more prominent destination in Georgia’s foreign policy. For Armenia, Russia remained a consistently prioritized destination up until 2018. However, there appears to be a decline in visits thereafter, which may be attributed to both the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s increasing preoccupation with the war in Ukraine. Azerbaijan’s diplomatic engagement with Russia and Türkiye displays a more balanced and stable pattern over time, though subtle shifts are evident. In the 1990s, Azerbaijani leaders made 8 visits to Russia and 15 to Türkiye. During the 2000s, the trend shifted, with 22 visits to Moscow and 9 to Ankara, signaling a temporary tilt toward Russia. In the 2010s, the numbers reversed again, with 12 visits to Russia and 16 to Türkiye. This pattern has persisted into the 2020s, which suggests a gradual realignment in Baku’s diplomatic preferences towards Ankara.

Table 2
Caucasian Leaders' Travel Frequency and Destinations (Moyer et al., 2025)

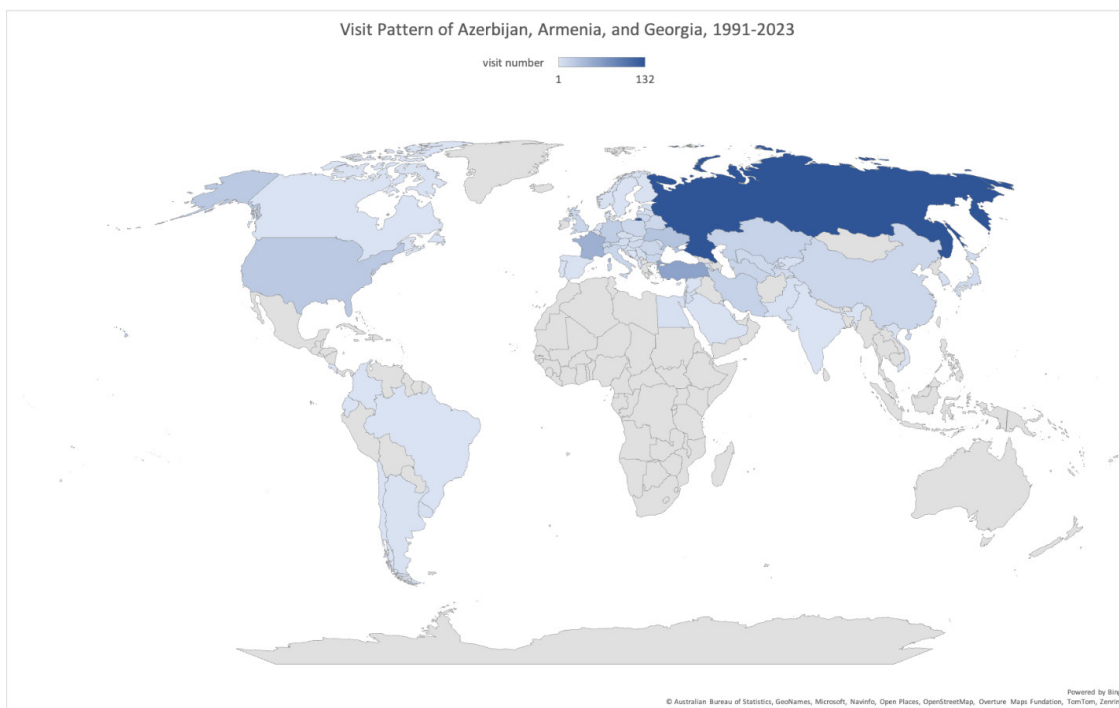
Country	Leaders	Day in Office	TOT.	%	RUS	TUR	IRN
ARM	Armen Sarkisyan	1394	27	0,01936872			
ARM	Levon Ter-Petrosyan	2276	28	0,01230228	9	1	
ARM	Robert Kocharyan	3717	54	0,01452785	17	1	1
ARM	Serzh Sarkisyan	3652	108	0,02957284	41	1	3
ARM	Vahagn Khachatryan	658	9	0,01367781	1		
AZE	Abulfaz Elchibey	372	2	0,00537634		1	
AZE	Ayaz Mutalibov	734	2	0,002724796		1	
AZE	Heydar Aliyev	3781	75	0,01983602	14	18	5
AZE	Ilham Aliyev	5539	223	0,04025997	33	27	7
GEO	Eduard Shevardnadze	4275	30	0,00701754	11		
GEO	Giorgi Gakharia	499	5	0,01002004		1	
GEO	Giorgi Kvirikashvili	896	19	0,02120536		2	
GEO	Irakli Garibashvili	1784	50	0,02802691		3	
GEO	Mamuka Bakhtadze	439	7	0,01594533			
GEO	Mikheil Saakashvili	3527	78	0,02211511	6	4	1

Table 2 disaggregates high-level visits by individual leaders across the South Caucasus. Among them, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emerges as the most active in conducting foreign visits. As of 31 December 2023, during a tenure exceeding 5,500 days, Aliyev made 223 bilateral visits, resulting in the highest visit-per-day ratio (0.0403) among all leaders in the region. His level of diplomatic engagement far surpasses that of other long-serving heads of state. Notably, unlike his father Heydar Aliyev, who made more visits to Türkiye than Russia, Ilham Aliyev exhibits a greater inclination toward Moscow. This pattern underscores Azerbaijan's outward-oriented foreign policy and its attempt to maintain equilibrium between major regional powers. Following Ilham Aliyev, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili ranks second in diplomatic engagement. Despite a significantly shorter tenure, he conducted 50 visits, with a high visit-per-day ratio of 0.0280, which places him among the most diplomatically active leaders in the region. Among Armenian leaders, Serzh Sargsyan stands out with 108 visits during his term in office. His foreign policy was heavily skewed toward Russia, with 41 of those visits directed to Moscow. This might reflect Armenia's strategic dependence on its northern neighbor.

The map illustrates the global distribution of high-level visits conducted by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia between 1991 and 2023. It reveals a clear regional bias in diplomatic outreach. Notably, there is no engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa, Southwest Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean, which clearly indicates a limited global diplomatic footprint beyond the broader Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic regions. Among the three regional powers-Türkiye, Russia, and Iran-Iran appears to attract the least diplomatic attention from Caucasian leaders. Conversely, Russia stands out as the most visited country, which reflects its continued centrality in the region. France also appears as a prominent destination, largely due to Armenia's repeated high-level visits. This pattern reflects historical, cultural, and diasporic ties between Yerevan and Paris. Geographical distance appears to lose its limiting impact in diplomatic outreach in the case of the United States. Alongside the U.S., the United Kingdom and China also received

a notable number of visits from the three Caucasian countries. This pattern suggests that great powers attract high-level diplomatic attention regardless of geographic proximity. Finally, former Soviet republics stand out as prominent destinations for Caucasian leaders. This pattern highlights the continued relevance of post-Soviet networks in shaping diplomatic behavior.

Figure 1
Geographical Distribution of Visits by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, 1991-2023



Which Regional Powers Do Travel to South Caucasus?

When multilateral meetings are included, the total number of foreign visits by South Caucasian leaders increases significantly—from 716 to 1,275, nearly doubling the count. This sharp rise reflects the fact that many key multilateral organizations are headquartered outside the South Caucasus, which results in frequent international travel. Conversely, hosting multilateral summits is a rare and prestigious opportunity for South Caucasian states. For this reason, we consider all high-level visits to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia as an indicator of their diplomatic attractiveness. According to the dataset by Moyer and friends (2025), a total of 525 foreign leaders visited the South Caucasus between 1991 and 2023. However, when visits that did not involve formal meetings with host country leaders are excluded, this number decreases to 424. Table 3 presents all incoming visits disaggregated by year and destination country. The data show that Azerbaijan emerges as the most visited country, attracting 278 high-level visits—more than Armenia (106) and Georgia (141) combined. The table also reveals key patterns in regional engagement. Iran, for example, shows no recorded visits to Armenia or Georgia during this period, while it conducted 13 visits to Azerbaijan. Türkiye demonstrates a clear preference for Azerbaijan as well, with a marked increase in visits after 2006. Russia, in contrast, maintains a more balanced engagement with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, while largely avoiding visits to Georgia, which likely reflects the sustained political tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi following the 2008 war.

Table 3
Numbers of Visits to South Caucasian Countries by Year (Moyer et al., 2025)²

	GEO+ARM+AZE				Georgia				Armenia				Azerbaijan			
	TOT	RUS	TUR	IRN	TOT	RUS	TUR	IRN	TOT	RUS	TUR	IRN	TOT	RUS	TUR	IRN
1991	5	2			1				2	1			2	1		
1992	1		1										1		1	
1993	1			1									1			1
1994	2	1			2	1										
1995	8		3		4		1						4		2	
1996	10				5				3				2			
1997	10		2		3				2				5		2	
1998	9		1		2		1		2				5			
1999	6				2				1				3			
2000	10	1			6								4	1		
2001	13	3			1				10	2			2	1		
2002	5				1				1				3			
2003	13	1			3				3				7	1		
2004	15		1	1	6		1		2				7			1
2005	19	1	2	1	9				4	1			6		2	1
2006	8			1	1				3				4			1
2007	26		1	1	13		1		1				12			1
2008	34		3		19		1						15		2	
2009	13	1	2		2	1	1		4				7		1	
2010	18		2	1	4		1		4				10		1	1
2011	28	1	2		9	1	1		5				14		1	
2012	27		2	1	4				6				17		2	1
2013	14	2			1				1	1			12	1		
2014	22		2	1	6				3				13		2	1
2015	28	2	1		8				3	1			17	1	1	
2016	23	2	1	1	4				7	1			12	1	1	1
2017	15		1		6				2				7		1	
2018	37	1	2	2	7				19				11	1	2	2

² The "Total" columns indicate the number of visits made to all countries worldwide and are not the sum of the visits listed in the corresponding regional columns.

2019	44	1	1	2	3				7	1			34		1	2
2020	6		2						1				5		2	
2021	11		2		4				2				5		2	
2022	22	1	2		4				5	1			13		2	
2023	22		2		1				3				18		2	
Total	525	20	38	13	141	3	8	0	106	9	0	0	278	8	30	13

Moyer et al.’s (2025) dataset includes only the highest-ranking leader serving as both head of state and government. However, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the interactions among the six countries under study, it is important to also consider visits by foreign ministers, ceremonial presidents, and secondary prime ministers. These actors often play critical roles in maintaining diplomatic ties and conducting high-level exchanges. In the sections that follow, we examine the visits of the three regional powers-Türkiye, Russia, and Iran-to the South Caucasian states-Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia-individually. After presenting the visit patterns of each regional power, we provide a comparative interpretation that synthesizes their respective diplomatic engagements with the South Caucasus.

According to data compiled by Balcı and Pulat (2024; Balcı, 2024c), Turkish high-level officials-including presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers-visited South Caucasian countries 148 times between 1991 and 2023 (Table 4). Of these visits, 106 were to Azerbaijan, 37 to Georgia, and only 5 to Armenia. This distribution clearly illustrates Azerbaijan’s central position in Türkiye’s regional diplomacy. Notably, Baku is not only the top destination among South Caucasian countries, but also one of the most frequently visited capitals globally by Turkish presidents and prime ministers (Balcı & Pulat, 2024, p. 4). When averaged over the 33-year period, Turkish leaders visited Azerbaijan more than three times per year, a frequency that far exceeds Türkiye’s engagement with the other two South Caucasian states. In contrast, Türkiye’s presence in Georgia is more modest but steady, consisting of 10 presidential, 11 prime ministerial, and 16 foreign ministerial visits. Interestingly, the relatively consistent pattern of presidential visits to Georgia disappears after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War while foreign ministerial visits become consistent. Finally, engagement with Armenia remains minimal, limited to just five visits.

Table 4
Türkiye’s Visits to Caucasian States (Balcı & Pulat, 2024; Balcı, 2024c)

	Total	Azerbaijan			Georgia			Armenia		
		Pres.	PM	FM	Pres.	PM	FM	Pres.	PM	FM
1991	1	1								
1992	8		2	2		1	3			
1993	1	1								
1994	2			1	1					
1995	8	1	2	2	1	1	1			
1996	1		1							
1997	5		3	1	1					
1998	3	2				1				
1999	1	1								

2000	4	3			1					
2001	1				1					
2002	1	1								
2003	4	1	1				2			
2004	2			1		1				
2005	3	1	1		1					
2006	4	1	1	1	1					
2007	7	1	2		1	1	2			
2008	11	2	2	2		1	1	2		1
2009	9	1	1	4		1	1			1
2010	3	1	1			1				
2011	3		1			1	1			
2012	3		1	2						
2013	6	1		2			2			1
2014	6	1	2	1	2					
2015	5	1	1	3						
2016	7	2	1	3			1			
2017	12	1	1	7		2	1			
2018	7	2	1	4						
2019	5	2		2			1			
2020	5	2		3						
2021	2	2								
2022	4	2		2						
2023	4	2		2						
Total	148	36	25	45	10	11	16	2	0	3

Table 5 presents Russian high-level visits to the three South Caucasian countries. While Azerbaijan and Armenia have received a substantial number of visits from Russian leaders, Georgia remains largely absent from Russia's diplomatic route. This pattern becomes particularly stark following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, after which official Russian visits to Tbilisi effectively ceased. Although Moyer et al.'s dataset records two presidential visits to Georgia, these refer to trips to Abkhazia, a breakaway region that Russia recognizes as an independent state. For example, during his 2011 visit, Vladimir Putin attended the funeral of Sergei Bagapsh, the de facto President of Abkhazia (Kremlin, no date). These visits, while geographically within Georgia's internationally recognized borders, do not constitute formal diplomatic engagement with the Georgian government and instead reflect Russia's contested territorial posture in the region. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War also appears to have influenced Russia's engagement with Azerbaijan and Armenia, as visits to both countries increased noticeably after this pivotal event. On a global scale, studies show that the war marked a turning point in Russia's diplomatic strategy. As noted by Aras and Fazlıođlu (2025),

Moscow intensified its high-level visits to countries within its regional sphere of influence and expanded its outreach to states aligned with its broader geopolitical agenda.

Table 5
Russia's Visits to Caucasian States (Balcı & Aras, 2025)

		Azerbaijan			Georgia			Armenia		
		Pres.	PM	FM	Pres.	PM	FM	Pres.	PM	FM
1991										
1992										
1993	1						1			
1994	2				1		1			
1995	1					1				
1996	3			1			1			1
1997										
1998										
1999	3			1			1			1
2000										
2001	3	1						2		
2002	1								1	
2003										
2004	1						1			
2005	5			1		1	1	1	1	
2006	2	1	1							
2007	2			1						1
2008	5	1					1	1	1	1
2009	3	1		1						1
2010	4	2						1		1
2011	2			1						1
2012	2			1						1
2013	2	1						1		
2014	2			1						1
2015	4	1		1				1		1
2016	11	1	1	3				1	2	3
2017	3			1					1	1

2018	2	1		1						
2019	5			1				2	1	1
2020	3			1					1	1
2021	4			1					1	2
2022	5		1	1				1	1	1
2023	2			1					1	
	69	9	3	17	0	1	3	9	10	17

Table 6 presents Iran's high-level engagements with the three South Caucasian states. Unlike the Turkish and Russian datasets, Iran's visit data do not include pre-1997 foreign ministerial visits, which should be taken into account when making cross-country comparisons in the region. Nevertheless, the available data reveal important patterns in Iran's diplomatic outreach. Most notably, the table highlights Tehran's minimal engagement with Georgia. While Iranian presidents have visited Tbilisi only once, foreign ministerial visits total just three. This reflects a consistently low level of diplomatic interaction between Iran and Georgia, in contrast to Iran's more frequent engagement with the other two South Caucasian states. When it comes to Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iranian diplomatic activity has been considerably more pronounced, particularly after 2002. The data indicate a steady increase in high-level visits to both countries, suggesting growing strategic and regional interest. While Azerbaijan emerges as the most visited country by Iranian leaders (37 visits in total), Armenia also attracted a substantial number of visits (19), especially when compared to the limited Turkish engagement with Yerevan over the same period.

Table 6
Iran's Visits to Caucasian States (Balcı, 2024b)

		Azerbaijan		Georgia		Armenia	
		Pres.	FM	Pres.	FM	Pres.	FM
1991							
1992							
1993	1	1					
1994							
1995	1			1			
1996							
1997							
1998	1		1				
1999							
2000	1		1				
2001							
2002							
2003	3		1		1		1

2004	2	1				1	
2005	2	1	1				
2006	3	2	1				
2007	3	1				1	1
2008	1		1				
2009	2		1				1
2010	4	2			1		1
2011	2					1	1
2012	5	2	3				
2013	2						2
2014	1	1					
2015	1						1
2016	8	2	5			1	
2017	4		2		1		1
2018	2	1	1				
2019	5	2	1			2	
2020							
2021	2						2
2022	1						1
2023	3		2				1
	60	16	21	1	3	6	13

Some Concluding Reflections

In the 1990s, some scholars argued that the South Caucasus was witnessing the emergence of two opposing blocs: a Russia–Armenia–Iran axis versus a Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Georgia alignment, with backing from the United States and Israel (Criss & Güner, 1999; Simonian & Dekmejian, 2001, p. 110–111; Hill, 2003, p. 63). However, when we examine high-level leader interactions, such sweeping claims appear unsubstantiated. For instance, Georgia did not engage in any official visits to Iran during the 1990s, but neither did Armenia (see Table 1). Similarly, Iranian presidential visits to the region during that decade were absent altogether, with neither Armenia nor Georgia receiving such visits (Table 3). These patterns undermine the notion of a clearly defined Iran–Armenia alignment or a counterbalancing Georgia–anti-Iran bloc. Focusing on Azerbaijan, it is evident that Baku maintained stronger ties with Türkiye than with either Russia or Iran in the immediate post-Cold War decade. However, Azerbaijani presidents also conducted a notable number of visits to Russia rather than pursuing an outright alignment against Moscow. In other words, the high-level visit interactions do not support the notion that Azerbaijan was firmly embedded in an anti-Russia bloc.

The visit data clearly demonstrate that Armenia remains largely excluded from Türkiye’s regional diplomatic engagements, as reflected in the extremely low number of high-level visits between the two countries. In the case of Georgia, a marked decline in diplomatic interaction with Russia is evident after the 2008

war, which indicates a distancing from Moscow in the post-invasion period. Additionally, Georgia's high-level contacts with Iran are minimal, which might be interpreted as its limited engagement with regional powers beyond Türkiye. As such, Georgia may be seen as aligning with an anti-Russia and anti-Iran bloc, but only after 2008. Given Georgia's significance in Türkiye's grand strategy (Aktürk, 2020), Türkiye's exceptional diplomatic interest in Tbilisi is understandable. In contrast, Azerbaijan stands out as the only South Caucasian country to pursue a balanced and multidirectional diplomacy. Azerbaijani presidents have conducted an equal number of visits to Türkiye and Russia, while also maintaining regular-though less frequent-engagement with Iran. When we examine inbound visits to Baku, Türkiye emerges as the most active visitor, far surpassing both Russia and Iran. This pattern suggests that Türkiye has invested more heavily than Azerbaijan itself in cultivating a strategic bloc.

A clear pattern emerges when examining intra-Caucasian high-level visits. Georgia stands out as the only country that has maintained substantial diplomatic engagement with both of its neighbors. Georgian leaders conducted 11 visits to Armenia and 17 visits to Azerbaijan. In contrast, Azerbaijan has visited Georgia 10 times, but has not conducted any official high-level visits to Armenia. Similarly, Armenia has paid 17 visits to Georgia, but has visited Azerbaijan only once. This asymmetrical pattern underscores the profound impact of the territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan on diplomatic relations within the region. The near absence of direct engagement between Yerevan and Baku reflects the deep-seated political hostility stemming from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These inter-Caucasian dynamics, shaped by unresolved territorial dispute, in turn influence the broader regional order. It, therefore, limits avenues for cooperation and shapes the diplomatic visit patterns of regional powers, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. For example, Türkiye's strong alignment with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has resulted in minimal engagement with Armenia, while producing a disproportionately high frequency of visits to Baku. This clearly shows intra-Caucasian dynamics influenced Ankara's strategic priorities and visit patterns in the region.

Given Türkiye's sustained and intensive engagement with both Azerbaijan and Georgia, its recent efforts to normalize relations with Armenia following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War position Ankara as a potentially dominant regional actor in the South Caucasus. Unlike Russia, whose diplomatic ties with Georgia deteriorated sharply after 2008, Türkiye maintained its high-level visits to Tbilisi. Simultaneously, it expanded its engagement with Baku, and remained as Azerbaijan's most frequent diplomatic partner. Moreover, Türkiye has played a proactive role in facilitating Armenian–Azerbaijani rapprochement in the post-war period. The first-ever official visit of an Armenian president to Türkiye in June 2025 was not a symbolic gesture but rather a strategic milestone (Aljazeera, 2025), which shows Ankara's intent to act as a unifying regional power rather than a participant in polarizing bloc dynamics. In this context, Türkiye's regional strategy appears to aim at reshaping the South Caucasus geopolitical landscape by building bridges-even with long-estranged neighbors such as Armenia-while consolidating its influence in Georgia and Azerbaijan (Erşen, 2013). Ankara attempted a similar approach in 2008–2009 through rare high-level visits to Armenia, but the current normalization effort appears more strategic and sustainable, as it is being pursued without jeopardizing its close relations with Baku.

References

- Aktürk, Ş. (2020). Türkiye's grand strategy as the third power: A realist proposal. *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, 25(2), 152-177.
- Aljazeera. (2025, June 20). *Armenian PM visits Türkiye for 'historic' trip aimed at normalising ties*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/20/armenian-pm-in-turkiye-for-historic-visit-aimed-at-normalising-ties>
- Aras, B., & Fazlioglu, B. (2025). The Brothers Karamazov go abroad: A dataset of Russian leaders' foreign visits. *The Review of International Organizations*, 1–41.
- Balci, B., & Monceau, N. (Eds.). (2021). *Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the Middle East: Establishing a new regional order*. Springer Nature.
- Balci, A. (2024a). Determinants of leader visits: A review and future directions in scholarship. *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 11(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.26513/tocd.1399133>
- Balci, A. (2024b). Drivers of Iran's Africa engagement: An analysis of high-level leadership visits. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241291060>
- Balci, A. (2024c). Determinants of Türkiye's relations with Africa: Insights from high-level leader visits. *Turkish Journal of African Studies*, 1(1), 64–90.
- Balci, A. (2025, May 26). *Do leader visits still matter? Reflections on a remarkable week in global diplomacy*. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/05/26/do-leader-visits-still-matter-reflections-on-a-remarkable-week-in-global-diplomacy/>
- Balci, A., & Aras, B. (2025). Giving a hand to autocrats: Are Russia's high-level visits for authoritarian durability? *Journal of Peace Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433251318911>
- Balci, A., & Pulat, A. (2024). Love, money or fame? Determinants of Türkiye's leader visits. *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad104>
- Balci, A., Kim, J. D., Moyer, J. D., Meisel, C., McKee, K., Batur, A., Woo, B., Choi, S., Ku, M., Van Rythoven, E., & Holmes, M. (2025). High-level leader visits: A promising area of study in IR. *International Studies Perspectives*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaf008>
- Criss, N. B., & Güner, S. (1999). Geopolitical configurations: The Russia-Türkiye-Iran triangle. *Security Dialogue*, 30(3), 365–376.
- Erşen, E. (2013). Türkiye as a "Regional Stability Contributor" in the South Caucasus. *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya Araştırmaları*, 15, 1-19.
- Erşen, E., & Çelikpala, M. (2019). Türkiye and the changing energy geopolitics of Eurasia. *Energy Policy*, 128, 584-592.
- Flanagan, S. J. (2013). The Türkiye-Russia-Iran nexus: Eurasian power dynamics. *The Washington Quarterly*, 36(1), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.751656>
- Hamre, J. J. (2013). *The Türkiye, Russia, Iran nexus: Evolving power dynamics in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hill, F. (2003). Seismic shifts in Eurasia: The changing relationship between Türkiye and Russia and its implications for the South Caucasus. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 3(3), 55–75.
- Hughes, B., & Volgy, T. (1970). Distance in foreign policy behavior: A comparative study of Eastern Europe. *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 14(3), 459–492.

- Isachenko, D. (2023). Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the South Caucasus: How manageable is their competition amidst the Ukraine war? In *After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security*. Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.), July 2023, Vienna, Austria.
- Kardaş, Ş. (2011). Turkish–Azerbaijani energy cooperation and Nabucco: Testing the limits of the new Turkish foreign policy rhetoric. *Turkish Studies*, 12(1), 55–77.
- Kasim, K. (2001). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Caspian oil and regional powers. In B. Gökey (Ed.), *The politics of Caspian oil* (pp. 185–198). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kastner, S. L., & Saunders, P. C. (2012). Is China a status quo or revisionist state? Leadership travel as an empirical indicator of foreign policy priorities. *International Studies Quarterly*, 56(1), 163–177.
- Kremlin. (n.d.). Vladimir Putin’s visit to Abkhazia (June 2, 2011). <https://kremlin-roadmap.gfsis.org.ge/visits/display/2>
- Ma, X., & Kang, D. C. (2023). Why Vietnam is not balancing China: Vietnamese security priorities and the dynamics in Sino-Vietnam relations. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 23(3), 363–386.
- Mesbahi, M. (2010). Eurasia between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. In M. Freire & R. Kanet (Eds.), *Key players and regional dynamics in Eurasia: The return of the “Great Game”* (pp. 164–192). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mesquita, R., & Chien, J. H. (2021). Do regional powers prioritise their regions? Comparing Brazil, South Africa and Türkiye. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(7), 1544–1565.
- Moyer, J. D., Meisel, C. J., Szymanski-Burgos, A., Scott, A. C., Casiraghi, M. C. M., Kurkul, A., Hughes, M., Kettlun, W., McKee, K. X., & Matthews, A. S. (2025). When heads of government and state (HOGS) fly: Introducing the Country and Organizational Leader Travel (COLT) dataset measuring foreign travel by HOGS. *International Studies Quarterly*, 69(2), sqaf013.
- Rubinstein, A. Z., & Smolansky, O. M. (1995). *Regional power rivalries in the New Eurasia: Russia, Türkiye and Iran*. Routledge.
- Sahakyan, M. D., & Lo, K. (2025). Hotspot geopolitics: Political economy of the Belt and Road Initiative in South Caucasus. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 1–24.
- Simonian, H. H., & Dekmejian, R. H. (2001). *Troubled waters: The geopolitics of the Caspian Region*. I.B. Tauris.
- Thompson, W. R. (1970). The Arab sub-system and the feudal pattern of interaction: 1965. *Journal of Peace Research*, 7(2), 151–167.

About the Author

Ali Balci

Sakarya University | [alibalci\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:alibalci[at]gmail.com) | ORCID: 0000-0003-4429-9318

Ali Balci is professor at the Department of International Relations in Sakarya University, Türkiye. His academic writings appeared in such journals as: *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *International Studies Review*, *Geopolitics*, *Global Policy*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and *Millennium*. He is also the author of the following books: *Türkiye’de Militarist Devlet Söylemi (Militarist State Discourse in Türkiye)* [Kadim Yayınları, 2011], *Türkiye Dış Politikası: İlkeler, Aktörler, Uygulamalar (Türkiye’s Foreign Policy: Principles, Actors, Practices)* [Alfa Yayınları, 2017], *Dış Politikada Hesaplaşmak: AK Parti, Ordu ve Kemalizm (Confronting through Foreign Policy: AK Party, Military and Kemalism)*, [Etkileşim Yayınları, 2015], *The PKK-Kurdistan’s Workers Party’s Regional Politics During and After the Cold War* [Palgrave, 2017], and *Birleşmiş Milletler Güvenlik Konseyi: Eleştirel Bir Giriş (The United Nations Security Council: A Critical Introduction)*, [İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2024]. Balci also is the co-editor of the following books: *Ortadoğu Yıllığı (Middle East Annual)* [Nobel Yayınları, 2006], and *Uluslararası İlişkilere Giriş: Tarih, Teori, Kavram ve Konular [Introduction to International Relations: History, Theory, Concepts and Issues]* [Küre Yayınları, 2014].