

# REGIONAL COOPERATION PLATFORMS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: AZERBAIJAN-GEORGIA-TÜRKİYE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRILATERAL DEFENCE COOPERATION

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*The article analyzes the history of defense cooperation of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye and the main factors rationalizing this cooperation, as well as another regional cooperation platform project proposed to be formed within the framework of new geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus as a result of the Second Karabakh War. The purpose of the research work is to reveal the importance of the trilateral defense cooperation of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye in the South Caucasus region with a fragile security environment and to analyze the possibility of the creation of another new proposed regional cooperation platform (3 (Türkiye, Russia and Iran) + 3 (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia)). The research work using the comparative analysis method emphasized the need to organize the reliable protection of the energy-transport-communication projects jointly implemented by Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye and to have the power to adequately respond to any threat that may arise in the region. Meanwhile, it was concluded that there is little possibility of the creation of another cooperation platform at the current stage and it was highlighted that the sides of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye should systemize the organization of coordination work at a high level between the relevant state institutions and the point that they should further strengthen their position to participate in future regional platforms.*

**Key words:** Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye, South Caucasus, Second Karabakh War, NATO, terror.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1991 after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the balance of geopolitical power at the international level was disrupted and the world order changed. Therefore, many large and small countries emerged as a result of the collapse of the USSR, which was the largest country in the world, with an area of 22 million square kilometers

extending from the east of Europe to the north of Asia. In this regard, The Caspian Sea, which was the Soviet-Iranian Sea, became the Eurasian Sea, and the Black Sea became the European Sea, as well as many post-Soviet countries, the countries of the South Caucasus also began to implement their independent foreign policies in the international arena.

In general, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye are of particular importance in

terms of their rich hydrocarbon resources, energy and transport-communication lines passing through their territories, and their geo-strategic location (The transit role between Asia and Europe, the location of the South Caucasus between regional military blocs such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Türkiye's access to the Middle East region, as well as the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, and the Marmara Sea). Due to the intersection of the interests of the regional and world superpowers in these regions, the one-time solution of the conflicts (terrorist provocations) occurring here does not completely depend on the will of the countries of the region. It is not accidental that after Azerbaijan and Georgia declared their independence to the whole world in 1991 the entire Caucasus region became a hotbed of conflicts and sustainable stability has not been achieved yet in the region. In this context, Russia-Chechnya, Russia-Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts) and Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict (as a result of the Second Karabakh War and the local anti-terrorist operation, although the Azerbaijani side has established its territorial integrity and sovereignty, a stable peace agreement between the parties has not been signed yet) is an example. As for the terrorist provocations occurring in the territory of Türkiye, it has not yet been possible to prevent these provocations completely.

Against the background of the above-mentioned, this article analyzed

the main factors that rationalize the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye trilateral defense cooperation arising from the national interests of all three countries in the South Caucasus region and another proposed regional cooperation platform project using the comparative analysis method.

## **2. AZERBAIJAN-GEORGIA-TÜRKİYE TRILATERAL DEFENCE COOPERATION: HISTORY AND IMPORTANCE**

Taking advantage of the historical conditions created by the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the peoples of Azerbaijan and Georgia regained their independence rights by expressing their national wills. After the restoration of their independence, the national development policy of both states, the foundation of future socio-political, socio-economic and cultural-spiritual development was laid. In addition, the goals and objectives, principles and characteristics, main directions and priorities of the domestic and foreign policy of the countries in question were determined.

Both states that regained their independence tried to find a way out of the difficult geopolitical situation and create a rational and pragmatic formula for their foreign policies. Azerbaijan, which has rich oil and gas deposits, is vital for Georgia in order to eliminate its energy dependence on Russia, and Georgia is also of special importance for Azerbaijan in terms of exporting oil and gas products to foreign markets and diversifying export routes in order to soften the political and economic

pressures of the region's powerful actors. This factor has led to the deepening of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations, especially to the increase of the political weight of both states in the international arena.

In 1993-1995, both countries succeeded in establishing constructive and effective relations with Türkiye. After signing the "Contract of the Century" on September 20, 1994, with transnational oil companies representing the world's leading countries (USA, Great Britain, Russia, Türkiye, Norway, Japan and Saudi Arabia) which aims to jointly develop oil and gas resources in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea and export them to European markets, alternative routes (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye-Europe) for the transportation of hydrocarbon resources to Europe were determined (Hasanov, 2015). In this framework, the foundation of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye (AGT) trilateral cooperation - "East-West" structuring was laid in the region.

Transportation of hydrocarbon resources of AGT strategic partner countries of the Caspian Basin and Central Asia (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP)) to Europe, Asia-Europe transit corridor (Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway) playing a role and taking part in the TRACECA (Europe-Caucasus-Asia) transport relations development program called "New Silk Road" are the main factors that increase the geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the region.

Against the background of separatist tendencies, wars and frozen conflict centers in the South Caucasus region, one of the main goals of the AGT trilateral cooperation platform is solving the region's problems. After the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, this cooperation platform was further strengthened. It is no coincidence that the occupied regions (by Azerbaijan: Karabakh and 7 surrounding districts, by Georgia: South Ossetia and Abkhazia) were indicated in the "Trabzon Declaration" at the first tripartite meeting between the foreign ministers of the AGT parties on June 8, 2012. It was emphasized that it is an obstacle to maintaining peace and stability in the region, as well as to the development of the region (Press Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2012).

The AGT tripartite platform, which is based on historical friendship, not only paves the way for the economic development of all three countries, but also meets the national interests of the countries. After the first meeting between the foreign ministers of the parties in 2012, economic, energy, transport-communication, defense, security, etc. holding high-level meetings in the tripartite format has become traditional. In this context, the trilateral cooperation in the field of defense, which creates a balance in front of other actors with interests in the region, as well as serves to maintain peace and stability in the region, is very important.

The first trilateral high-level meeting in the field of defense between AGT

was held at the level of defense ministers of the parties on August 19, 2014 in Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (Azertag, 2014). In order to conduct negotiations between the parties in this format and to discuss security issues in the region, an agreement was reached to hold trilateral meetings every year (by changing the order of the countries) and high-level meetings are being held in a tripartite format to this day. Moreover, trilateral meetings were held at the level of the Chiefs of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the parties at different times, and a working group from all three countries was appointed to determine development perspectives of cooperation. Armenia, another country of the South Caucasus region, was not included in the mentioned platform due to its policy and it considers the mentioned cooperation as a threat to itself.

The trilateral defense cooperation that aims at providing Türkiye's energy demand, Azerbaijan's need to export hydrocarbon resources to foreign markets, and the security of Georgia's transit geographical position is a rational cooperation between AGT. The factors listed below once again confirm that: in case of taking into account the sensitivity of the region's security (separatist tendencies, frozen conflict centers, terrorist threats and wars), emergence of necessity of the need to protect and ensure the security of critically important projects implemented jointly by the parties; the internationally recognized regions of Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) turning into frozen hotbeds of conflict

and critical projects implemented in a trilateral format passing through the area close to the contact line of Georgia with those regions; the fragility of the trilateral statement (Press Service of the President of the Russian Federation, 2020) (that was signed among President of the Republic of Azerbaijan I. H. Aliyev, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia N. V. Pashinyan and President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin) of November 10, 2020, which ended the 44-day-long Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the fact that a durable peace agreement has not yet been signed between the parties; the importance of NATO member country Türkiye and Georgia, which intends to integrate into NATO, as well as Azerbaijan, which won victory in the Karabakh war with the application of modern technologies, to exchange their experience with each other in defense and defense industry; terrorist (PKK, PYD, etc.) threats directed at Türkiye; after the victory in the Second Karabakh War, the President of Azerbaijan – Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces I. Aliyev's statement at a press conference for media representatives that the Azerbaijani Army will switch to a smaller model of the Turkish Army, etc. (Press Service of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2021).

One of the main goals of the establishment of the tripartite defense cooperation between the AGT is to restore peace and stability in the South Caucasus region. It should be especially emphasized that there are very few tripartite cooperation platforms in the world where each country has equal

rights and fully meets its national interests. Although the AGT tripartite cooperation platform fully meets the national interests of the countries included in this platform, the mentioned cooperation is also evaluated as rational in terms of geographical location, political, economic, military and security.

### **3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE REGIONAL COOPERATION PLATFORM PROJECT (3+3) FOR AZERBAIJAN-GEORGIA-TÜRKİYE TRILATERAL DEFENCE COOPERATION**

Over the past years, a number of proposals regarding cooperation in the South Caucasus region have been put forward by the leaders of the countries of the region. "Caucasus Initiative for Peace" by Georgian President Eduard Shverdnadze in 1999, "Caucasus Stability Pact" by Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel in 1999, "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2008, in 2010, the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili initiated the creation of "Whole Caucasus" cooperation platforms (Vali, 2021). However, none of the proposed initiatives were implemented due to certain reasons.

After the end of the Second Karabakh War in December 2020, the President of Türkiye R.T. Erdogan and the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev initiated the creation of a new cooperation platform in the region (3 (Türkiye, Russia and Iran) + 3 (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia)). The 3+3 cooperation platform intends the provision of sustainable peace in the region, as well as the implementation of economic, commercial, transport and infrastructure projects between the parties (Trthaber, 2021).

The new realities that emerged as a result of the Second Karabakh War, have not only changed the geopolitical situation in the region, but also have created the need to make certain changes in the foreign policies of the countries of the region, and they are as follows: the de facto existence of the entity called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" was terminated; Azerbaijan restored the 132 km border with Iran that was uncontrolled; Türkiye's influence in the region has become stronger (Shusha Declaration); Türkiye - Nakhchivan - Caspian Sea - Central Asia route will be established through the Zangezur corridor (Figure 1; Eldem, 2022) which was intended to open, etc.



**Fig. 1** Zangezur corridor (Eldem, 2022)

Against the background of the abovementioned realities, although the initiative of a new business platform in the 3+3 format was appreciated by Russia, Iran and Armenia, it was not accepted by Georgia.

The Russian side is interested in creating mechanisms that can influence both sides in order to sign a lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the mentioned platform by playing the role of a moderator, and in preventing Georgia, which pursues a foreign policy of integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and NATO, as well as in balancing the growing influence of Türkiye in the region.

The Iranian side, which is subject to the harsh economic sanctions of the United States and the European Union, intends to take part in all kinds of infrastructure projects in the region within the framework of the new geopolitical realities created by joining the mentioned platform, to take advantage of the land route connecting Armenia through the occupied territories of Azerbaijan on the eve of

the war, and to maintain its influence in the region.

Despite the fact that Armenia, which is in a state of blockade in the region, faces a number of obstacles intends to eliminate its dependence on Russia, diversify its foreign military-political course and develop its economy by joining the mentioned platform.

The Georgian side stated that it did not want to be on the same platform as the "occupier" citing the fact that the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are occupied by Russia. For this reason the Georgian side did not participate in the meeting of the mentioned cooperation platform at the level of deputy ministers of foreign affairs held in Russia in December 2021 (Civil, 2021). Despite that The Georgian flag was also hung in the meeting hall and a message was given that "the doors are open" for Georgia.

Regarding this issue, the statement made by the former foreign minister of Georgia, David Zalkaliani, was as follows. "Our partners and neighbors, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, strategic partners, [Turkey] and U.S.,

are aware that it'll be very hard for us to participate in the format together with the occupier country [Russia]. Given the situation that we do not see any process towards de-occupation, it is very difficult to sit down in this format and discuss infrastructure projects" (Civil, 2021).

In addition, although the normalization of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan has been observed recently, the following undesirable events that occurred between the two countries had a negative impact on the further development of bilateral relations: Terrorist attack against the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Iran (Voanews, 2023); Closing the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Tehran (Voanews, 2023); Declaring "persona-non-grata" to 4 (four) employees of the Embassy of Iran in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Aacom, 2023); Making a statement by the official bodies of Azerbaijan about the exposure of Iran's "agency network" in Azerbaijan, etc. (Press Service of the State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022).

If attention is paid to the advantages of regional cooperation, the 3+3 format promises great potential not only from a political and security point of view, but also from an economic point of view. According to calculations, the total economy of the countries included in the 3+3 format is approximately 3 trillion dollars, which means the fifth largest economy in the world after the United States, China, Japan and Germany. This platform is the third largest in the world with a population of

331 million people, and the first in terms of territory.

The 3+3 format can lead to the acceleration of regional trade and thus economic growth. Strengthening and developing trade relations with Russia, Turkey and Iran, which will be a big sales market for South Caucasus countries. On the other hand, the mentioned platform will limit the South Caucasus countries' ability to maneuver within the framework of their cooperation with other countries.

### 3. CONCLUSION

While analyzing the above-mentioned factors, it seems impossible that regional cooperation in the 3+3 format will take place with the participation of all countries in the near future. Certainly, a lot will depend on the political will of the parties. As a result, taking into account that the region where AGT is located is not a stable and safe region, in order to prevent the sabotage of energy and transport-communication projects by countries and terrorist organizations that wish to weaken the existing tripartite cooperation between the parties, the issue of security of jointly implemented critical projects should be reviewed once again. In this framework, the AGT parties should further expand their relations in all fields within the framework of trilateral cooperation and strengthen their position to participate in future regional platforms in accordance with their national interests.

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