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The "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences

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Abstract

The "3+3" format for regional cooperation is an initiative voiced by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which intends to strengthen trade and economic ties between Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Only Georgia from the listed countries is not interested in participation due to Russia's role in the format. However, the other five countries might continue with the initiative despite a large number of competing interests and frictions among them. Nonetheless, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prospect of deepening cooperation with Moscow became even more restrained for all participants, so the future of "3+3" became even more contentious. It should be noted that the proposed format is considered as the project that could undermine the West's role by excluding its presence and influence over the region. Thus, this project poses significant political challenges to the region.

Introduction

In 2020, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh provoked fundamental changes in the South Caucasus region. Barriers erected over the years between neighbouring countries have begun to come down, and a window of new opportunities has emerged for intensification of trade and economic relations between the countries. However, the emerging problem of demarcation-delimitation of the changed borders after the war causes constant tension and periodic military escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, the Nagorno-Karabakh war drastically changed the security environment in the South Caucasus, which did not become safer. The interests of large regional players seeking to strengthen their influence over small countries intensified, and the level of geopolitical competition increased as well.

After Azerbaijan's victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan voiced an initiative to set up a "platform of six" to develop closer cooperation between the six countries in the region on issues related to security, economy and transportation. On December 10, 2020, at a Victory Parade in Baku, the Turkish president announced that he had discussed the "platform of six" with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, which could be formed among Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, Georgia and Armenia. Erdoğan's initiative was later expanded to include Iran, and the "platform of six" was eventually framed into the "3+3" (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia + Turkey, Russia, Iran) format. From the beginning, Russia's position on participating in the proposed format of regional cooperation was positive; the same was true for the positions of Azerbaijan and Iran (Daily Sabah, 2021). Armenia has met the proposed cooperation format reluctantly, while Georgia has refused (Interpressnews, 2021a).

On December 10, 2021, exactly one year after Erdoğan's announcement, the first working meeting of the "3+3" was held in Moscow at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers. The meeting was held without Georgia; however, the host country (Russia) presented the Georgian flag at the meeting and indicated that "the door remains open for Georgia" (Interpressnews, 2021b). The next meeting was scheduled in February 2022 in Turkey, but after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the meetings scheduled within this format were delayed. However, the talks on the "3+3" project are still ongoing. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov regularly discusses this issue with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and repeatedly calls on Tbilisi to become involved in the project (Ria Novosti, 2022).

Major Interests and Contradictions of the Participating Countries

The name of the "3+3" format already indicates that, on the one hand, there are 3 regional major powers in the form of Russia, Turkey and Iran, and on the other hand, there are small regional states in the form of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Consequently, this format of collaboration in no way can be symmetrical, and it primarily serves advancing the interests of dominant regional actors and to redistributing spheres of influence among them. These three major states consider the South Caucasus region to be within their exclusive sphere of influence. All three are driven by a more or less common interest—to expel the West from the region. Although Turkey is a member of NATO, it does not want to see other players in its "backyard".

At the same time, there is fierce competition between Russia, Turkey and Iran for the distribution of spheres of influence in the South Caucasus. Despite the declared

stable and partnership relations, Russia and Turkey remain the main competitors in the region. Russia considers the post-Soviet space to be its area of unconditional influence and wants hegemony in the South Caucasus. Moscow has already occupied two regions in Georgia and has leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan through "a peace mandate". In addition, Russia sees the South Caucasus region as a kind of corridor to the Middle East.

Turkey is no less interested in leading the region, and through an alliance with Azerbaijan ("One Nation, Two Countries"), wants to demonstrate its strength and superiority. At the same time, for Turkey, the South Caucasus is a corridor to the Caspian states.

For Iran, it is less visible on the political scene in the South Caucasus. Its room for manoeuvre is also restricted by Western sanctions, but to some extent, Tehran retains its leverage over Armenia, as that country has to work closely with Iran due to the long-time blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Meanwhile, Tehran also has close ties with Azerbaijan. Iran has several major strengths and advantages over Turkey and Russia: it is geographically the only country bordering Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Nakhichevan region. Consequently, Iran has been the only communication route for decades between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan. Iran's participation is also crucial for the restoration of the Soviet-era railway on the southern edge of the South Caucasus region. In addition, Iran is the only country that has maintained regular diplomatic relations with all three countries of the South Caucasus. Tehran is interested in achieving economic de-isolation and opening all routes connecting it to Russia (Kaleji, 2021).

For Azerbaijan, Baku aims to receive maximum benefits from a "new regional reality" following its victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Azerbaijan will continue to use any international format to legitimize the control of the territories it gained as a result of the war. At the same time, joining the cooperation format proposed by Turkish president Erdoğan will be the gesture of gratitude to him as he helped Baku greatly to win the war.

As for Armenia's interests in the "3+3" format, the country government does not seem completely sure about the benefits of the proposed cooperation format, but it does not want to miss a chance to escape from the long-time isolation. Armenian leadership voiced certain scepticism about the project but did not refuse to take a seat at the table. According to the Armenian side, Yerevan may be interested in the "3+3" format if the agenda does not include issues already discussed in other formats, including talks on Karabakh within the OSCE Minsk Group, as well as trilateral talks on unblocking transport hubs between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. Some Armenian experts reckon that Armenia will be a small player at the negotiating table and will not be able to develop its own agenda within the "3+3" format (Khachatryan, 2021). The Nagorno-Karabakh war is over, but territorial and legal issues still exist, which may hamper cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan within any given format.

Ties between Armenia and Turkey have been severed since 1993. Recently, the negotiations on the restoration of ties between Armenia and Turkey resumed after the first meeting of the "3+3" format in Moscow. On December 13, 2021, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Ankara and Yerevan would appoint special envoys to normalize their relations. A number of meetings have already taken place between the special representatives of the two countries, and both sides are ready for subsequent negotiations. (News.am, 2021).

At the same time, there are also issues between Iran and Azerbaijan, as well as between Turkey and Iran for numerous reasons, including prominent ethnic and territorial issues.

Why Does Georgia Refuse to Participate?

As Georgia is the only country refusing to participate in the given project, its final decision will be crucial for the future of the format.

Since the Russo–Georgia August war of 2008, diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia have been broken. Currently, there is only one official format left between Georgia and Russia for discussing security and humanitarian issues—the Geneva International Discussion. In addition, the informal format of the Georgian–Russian dialogue initiative has been functioning since late 2012 between Zurab Abashidze, the Georgian Prime Minister's Special Representative for Russia, and Grigory Karasin, Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, where the parties exchange views on economic and humanitarian issues.

The most important factor hindering Georgia's participation in the "3+3" platform is the occupation of Georgian territories. Russian military forces occupy 20% of the Georgian territory, and the creeping occupation continues to this day. According to statements of the Georgian government, until the problem of occupation in Georgia is resolved, a barrier to cooperation with Russia at the official level will exist (Interpressnews, 2021c). As Russia does not consider the possibility of restoration of Georgia's territorial unity yet, implementation of a "3+3" format looks doubtful. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prospect of tighter cooperation with Moscow has become even less attractive amid Western sanctions on Russia and in light of its deepening international isolation.

In summary, the "3+3" platform of regional cooperation is mainly considered an anti-Western coalition in Georgia, the main purpose of which is to redistribute the balance of power and expel the West from the region. However, Georgia aspires to integrate into Western institutions, seeks to strengthen ties with the European Union and NATO and looks at becoming more involved in European institutions. Georgia's pro-western political vector is determined by Georgia's Constitution. According to Article 78, the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Consequently, joining a format that implies access restriction to the West contradicts the Georgian foreign policy vector set out in the country's constitution. At the same time, deepening economic or other ties between Tbilisi and Tehran also faces a risk, especially in light of the Western sanctions imposed on Iran.

Under the guise of strengthening regional economic cooperation, the emphasis of the "3+3" platform on opening transport corridors suggests that pressure may be mounted on Georgia to open the Abkhazian railway, which would pose an additional threat to Georgia's state sovereignty. The railway route along the Black Sea coast through Abkhazia connecting Moscow to Tehran has been closed since 1992. The idea of reopening railways is controversial in Georgia, as it is seen as giving concessions to Russia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia, which has an ambition for independence. Moreover, it seems that Georgian internally displaced persons from Abkhazia would not receive benefits from the deal. Based on Georgia's perspective, it will be difficult to define the legal frame of the project: there are several disputable questions related to customs and border checkpoint security (e.g., who will obtain the right of inspection on the border between Russia and Abkhazia at the Psou River).

Generally, reopening the rail link would increase Russia's economic activities in the South Caucasus. Resumption of the railway is of great interest not only to Russia but also to Armenia, Iran, Turkey and other countries that could use the line for their exports. Before 2020, Azerbaijan was against reopening the railway because Baku was afraid that this would noticeably weaken the effect of the Turkish–Azeri blockade and would offer the possibility of transporting military cargo to the Armenian army. Following the 2020 ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is likely that Baku will no longer veto the resumption of this rail link, while Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan could benefit from becoming part of a North–South rail route.

However, from an economic point of view, the "3+3" format does not offer clear additional economic benefits to Georgia. Georgia already has stable trade and economic relations with all neighbouring countries, including Russia. However, despite the barriers mentioned above, Moscow officially does not lose hope that Georgia will abandon its requirements and finally become involved in the proposed project "without preconditions" (TASS, 2022).

Conclusion

The proposed format of cooperation could be pragmatically attractive to regional states; however, there is no substantial basis to hope that it will facilitate tighter cooperation and dialogue between the states involved due to the various contesting interests. Russia, as well as Turkey, are striving to help break down the barriers hindering implementation of the "3+3" project as it was initially planned. It is expected that the authors of the project will consider different configurations of the format in case any of the proposed parties refuse to participate in it. At this given moment, the "3+2" format of cooperation is on the table. Simultaneously, the war in Ukraine has drastically changed the political situation and attitudes towards Russia. The ongoing war will largely affect the future of the project, the viability of which is highly questionable.

About the Author

Eka Javakhishvili works as analyst and holds a Master's degree in Social Sciences from the Centre of Social Sciences of Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

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