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The Platform of the 3+3 Format: A Review

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Introduction

The aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, which in Ankara and Baku was hailed as a triumphant victory for the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance, significantly changed the political situation and the balance of power in the Caucasus region. The turn of the decades-long status quo in favor of Azerbaijan showed that a new phase has begun in the region, often pointed out so by the victorious side as well.[1] Against the backdrop of a significantly changed regional agenda and the growing Turkish-Azerbaijani influence in the Caucasus, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan introduced the idea of establishing a six-member regional cooperation platform. If the idea were to materialize, the members would include Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Georgia, and Armenia.[2]

Erdogan's idea received a wide response in the region. The new platform for regional cooperation (Russia, Iran, Turkey + Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) has become an important topic of discussion in all six countries, primarily due to its controversial format. The idea of geographically adjacent but politically different countries joining one platform is in direct conflict with the opposing interests of these countries. Despite this significant obstacle, the apologists for the idea, that seeks to replace the conflicts and tensions in the Caucasus with a "long-term peace," remain hopeful that the platform will have a future.

The Turkish-Azerbaijani Proposal: 3 + 3 Format

The idea of forming a new platform for cooperation in the Caucasus region was presented by Turkey and Azerbaijan in the wake of the military success achieved in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is symbolic that Erdogan made the announcement about the platform in Baku during the parade dedicated to the victory in the war. With this gesture, Erdogan stressed that a new political reality has emerged in the Caucasus whose challenges require new mechanisms for cooperation.

[1] "Azerbaijan's Karabakh Victory Creates New Realities," https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan-front-line/azerbaijan-s-karabakh-victory-creates-new-realities/2064731

[2] "6-country Regional Cooperation Platform Win-win for Actors in Caucasus, Erdoğan Says," https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/6-country-regional-cooperation-platform-win-win-for-actors-in-caucasus-erdogan-says

Erdogan and Aliyev attend Azerbaijani Army parade in Baku, December 10, 2020. Photo: aljazeera.com

On the other hand, the announcement of the idea at the parade was a message that the Turkish-Azerbaijani side considers the conflict resolved and intends to formulate a new policy in the Caucasus from the victorious position. This is accompanied by the Turkish-Azerbaijani formula "One Nation, Two Countries" which Erdogan calls the "main philosophy" of the unity of these two nations.[3] According to Erdogan, the liberation of Karabakh was precisely a "climax" of this philosophy which opened the door to new perspectives in the region, including a new mechanism for cooperation. From the perspective of Ankara and Baku, this new concept of cooperation will further solidify their regional positions strengthened after the war.

Despite the ongoing negotiations and the preliminary support for the project of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran, the 3 + 3 format platform is still only at the development stage and no concrete steps have been taken to implement it. Consequently, it is unknown what kind of agreements, forms of cooperation and steps it includes; the diplomatic or bureaucratic details of the operation of the platform is also vague. Therefore, so far, the primary source to understand the goals and the priorities of the concept is only the statements of the representatives of the countries considered as future members of the platform. These statements have a more general characteristic covering the main political or economic dimension of the idea, without further details.

[3] "'One Nation, Two States' on Display as Erdogan Visits Azerbaijan for Karabakh Victory Parade," https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20201210-one-nation-two-states-on-display-as-erdogan-visits-azerbaijan-for-karabakh-victory-parade

For example, according to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the new platform has the potential to create favorable opportunities for "all parties." While presenting the idea for the first time, the Turkish president specifically focused on the defeated Armenia and, in his words, the new format will allow Armenia to “take positive steps" in establishing bilateral relations with Ankara. This underscored not only the economic significance of the platform, as noted by other leaders as well, but also its direct role in regulating foreign relations. After the war, both Turkey and Azerbaijan have repeatedly called on Yerevan to face the new reality[4] which should also become an important precondition for joining the platform. In this regard, it seems that the authors of the idea also perceive the platform as a tool for resolving political and diplomatic issues in the region.

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry,[5] in a statement which was published after the meeting of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on October 30 in Rome within the framework of the G20 summit, the ministers see the 3 + 3 mechanism as a tool to unblock economic and transport routes in the region and this will facilitate the implementation of infrastructure projects beneficial to all parties in the South Caucasus. Developed transport corridors and new economic agreements are appealing for Iran as well.

The last meeting between Lavrov and Cavusoglu at the G-20 summit in Rome, October 30, 2021. Photo: mid.ru

Countries that are perceived in the six-member format are often found in a single geopolitical context because of their geographical, historical or ongoing relationships; however, their consideration in a single platform raises many questions and obstacles. There are indeed those among these countries who would gladly agree to strengthen political or economic ties with each other, even within a

[4] “Armenia Should Strive to Normalize Relations with Azerbaijan: President Aliyev,” https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/armenia-should-strive-to-normalize-relations-with-azerbaijan-president-aliyev/2375996

[5] “Russian, Turkish Top Diplomats Discuss 3+3 Mechanism for South Caucasus — Foreign Ministry,” https://tass.com/politics/1356093

common platform, although placing all six under one umbrella creates a kind of political dissonance. The idea of establishing a similar platform in the Caucasus has existed before but this initiative could never materialize precisely because of the regional controversies and political tensions.

Despite Erdogan's seemingly optimistic attitude, the situation in the region in this regard has not changed since the Karabakh war as hotbeds of conflict and internal or external interests remain a problem - in some cases, the security situation in the region even exacerbated. One such new hotbed is the Iran-Azerbaijan confrontation which shows once again that there are still many unresolved issues between state actors of the region.[6] A conflict of interest in the establishment of the platform primarily concerns Georgia and Armenia as cooperation for these countries - in the case of Georgia with Russia and in the case of Armenia with Azerbaijan and Turkey - under one platform means going against their national interests and foreign policy course.

Supporting Parties: Russia and Iran

Russia and Iran have already expressed a positive attitude towards participation in the 3 + 3 platform proposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan. According to then Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, "the ground is ready for cooperation for all six countries." The Minister expressed readiness[7] to establish a similar type of cooperation between the countries of the region. Of the six countries, Iran is the only one that has diplomatic relations with all the others. Consequently, it can also act as a kind of connecting bridge within the platform.

This diplomatic role and growing importance in the region is an appealing prospect for Tehran which has been under severely damaging international isolation for years. In the condition of economic and political isolation, Iran can also benefit from two other factors which are the byproducts of the platform - the reduction of Western influence in the region and the infrastructure and transport projects. From Tehran’s perspective, the platform could also have the potential to make Iran’s strategic location more promising and profitable.

At the beginning of the year, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarifi conducted a foreign tour in the Caucasus and met with the leaders of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey.[8] Some experts have linked these visits to Iran's growing interests in the Caucasus region. Joining the new format is an interesting perspective for Iran in this regard as well. Tehran has a serious influence in the Caucasus and strengthening this influence is one of the most important foreign priorities in light of the new reality.

[6] Zurab Batiashvili, “Why Did Iran-Azerbaijan Relations Become Strained?,” https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1328

[7] “Turkey, Iran Propose 3+3 Format for Caucasus,” https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-hopes-us-returns-to-iran-nuclear-deal-162018

[8] “Iran Seeks New Role in Post-war Caucasus,” https://eurasianet.org/iran-seeks-new-role-in-post-war-caucasus

Meeting of Javad Zarif with the former Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia, January 29, 2021. Photo: Government of Georgia

The new mechanism of cooperation is acceptable for Russia as well. According to the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, the project has the approval of Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was also confirmed by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who declared that Russia is already working with its Armenian counterparts on this matter. Lavrov also stressed Georgia's negative attitude towards the issue and expressed hope that Tbilisi will reconsider its position and understand the "fundamental benefit" such a mechanism of consultation and coordination on regional decisions could bring to Georgia. In this regard, the most favorable for Moscow would be the incorporation of Georgia into the platform as the only country in the region that has explicitly declared a pro-Western orientation.

Georgia's involvement in the project is of particular importance for Russia as it will be the first joint platform since the August 2008 war and the Russian occupation of Georgian territories where the two countries will work directly together. Establishing such a platform in the region, theoretically with Georgian membership, would mean a geopolitical and diplomatic victory for Moscow over the West.

This is a key factor for a contemporary Russia. Although the idea directly involves the Caucasus region and the major players of the Caucasus, it clearly contains anti-Western sentiments. It is obvious why the formation of a regional platform led by sharply anti-Western Russia and Iran, along with Turkey, which recently had strained relations with the West, is appealing for the Kremlin. Russia will try to use this format to strengthen its position in the region and weaken the Western influence.

Opposing Parties: Georgia and Armenia

The main obstacle to the format proposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan is the positions of Georgia and Armenia. For them the establishment of a new platform for cooperation, on the on hand, with Russia and, on the other hand, with Azerbaijan and Turkey, is unacceptable. In this regard, the position of Tbilisi is apparently the clearest as sharing the same platform with Russia against the background of the Russian occupation and the absence of diplomatic relations creates a principled obstacle. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also mentioned that Tbilisi's attitude towards the idea is negative. It seems that the proponents of the idea are well aware that persuading Georgia to join the platform will be the most difficult task to achieve.

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani made an ambiguous statement in this regard, stressing the problematic nature of Russia's involvement in the platform but added that Georgia should not fall behind and must engage in the "major geopolitical projects and relations" of the region.[9] This part of the statement caused displeasure among the population in Tbilisi, showing that Georgian society opposes the idea of a 3 + 3 format due its anti-Western aspects and Russia's involvement. As a result of this reaction, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to make additional clarification and the likelihood of Georgia joining the platform was further reduced.

Despite the optimism of the authors and proponents of the idea that Georgia can still change position if it were to realize the benefits of the new cooperation mechanism for the country, the chances of Tbilisi joining this platform are very small. Various polls show that the Georgian population strongly supports the country's pro-Western vector[10] while those international platforms that, on the one hand, require direct diplomatic relationship with Russia and, on the other hand, are openly anti-Western, are unacceptable. It is hard to envisage the Georgian government taking this unpopular step, particularly considering the already tense internal political situation.

The situation is relatively different for Armenia - there are many obstacles to joining the platform but it is still being considered. At this stage, Armenia's official position is that Yerevan continues to study the issue and has not yet made a final decision. According to Armen Grigorian,[11] the Head of the Security Council of Armenia, this "vague format" of cooperation forces Armenia to thoroughly weigh the potential and likelihood of success of the platform. He said Armenia had offered some proposals to its partners but it "should not be interpreted as a clear position." Foreign Minister of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic David Babayan said that such format could not be utilized as a tool for resolving the conflict.[12] As it is clear from the statements of the Armenian politicians, there is a difference of opinion in Yerevan on this issue and the final position is yet to be reached.

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[9] "Foreign Minister Zalkaliani Talks 3+3 Platform," https://civil.ge/archives/447118

[10] "New Poll Reveals Georgians' Attitudes Towards West, Minorities, Recent Past," https://civil.ge/archives/416193

[11] "President Erdogan Calls for Cooperation to Achieve Lasting Peace in South Caucasus," https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-erdogan-calls-for-cooperation-to-achieve-lasting-peace-in-south-caucasus-2021-11-1-0/

[12] "Proposed 3+3 Format in No Way related to Conflict Settlement, Artsakh's Foreign Minister Says," https://en.armradio.am/2021/11/03/proposed-33-format-in-now-way-related-to-conflict-settlement-artsakhs-foreign-minister-says/

The Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan addresses the people after winning snap elections, June 21, 2021. Photo: dw.com

Yerevan is still recovering from the defeat in the Karabakh war but despite its generally negative attitude about the cooperation in a joint format with historically antagonistic Turkey and with Azerbaijan with which it has military conflict, Armenia has less room for maneuver. The Russian factor is also noteworthy - with its significant influence Moscow is actively working to persuade Yerevan. The factor of Iran should also be taken into account as it changed its more or less neutral rhetoric after the Karabakh war and congratulated Azerbaijan on regaining the "lost territories."[13] This is a categorically unacceptable position for Armenia as is sharing the same platform with Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, if Armenia refuses to join the platform in this situation, it may face greater political and economic isolation than before.

Main Conclusions

- The 3 + 3 platform proposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan is a direct result of Azerbaijan's success in the Karabakh war and it aims to strengthen the interests and positions of the alliance of these two countries in the region.
- The platform has so far only been announced at the concept level, without a specific action plan, although it is already clear that its political and diplomatic significance will be more important than simple economic and infrastructure one. This is also evident by Erdogan's statements, the crux of which is that the possible membership of Armenia in the platform will be a step towards the restoration of Turkish-Armenian relations.

[13] "Iran's President-elect Raisi Congratulates President Aliyev on Azerbaijan's Liberation of its Territories," https://en.azvision.az/news/147010/news.html

- The 3 + 3 format, which is supported by Russia and Iran, and excludes any involvement of Western countries and international institutions in the platform, will reduce the influence of the West in the region. In all likelihood, this is indeed one of the main goals behind the idea. This benefits both Moscow and Tehran. The latter may see the platform as a counterweight to the increased Turkish-Azerbaijani influence in the region after the Karabakh war.
- The prospects for the establishment of a new platform are still unclear but this topic remains open and relevant. The activity of high-ranking politicians and diplomats of Turkey, Russia and Iran in this direction, which has not stopped since the first announcement of the idea, shows that these parties consider the concept as a real possibility. Despite tangible obstacles, the work in this respect will continue in the future and we should expect important meetings and announcements further down the road.
- The biggest challenge of the 3 + 3 format is the negative stand of Georgia without which the concept of the platform would be incomplete. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Georgia is not going to join anything at the expense of national interests but the authors and supporters of the concept do not lose hope. The reason for this may be the ambiguous part of the statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia which caused dissatisfaction of the pro-Western section of Georgian society.
- The other most problematic part of the platform is Armenia but in its case, there is more leverage to increase pressure, especially from Russia. The issue remains open in Yerevan today and the announcement of a final decision may have significant political and public resonance.