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Terms, Conditions, Intersecting Interests

Turkey and Regional Cooperation After the Second Karabakh War

Ayça Ergun

This essay should be understood as a series of reflections on the geopolitics of the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War and how this has provided Turkey with a great opportunity to revisit, redefine, and even consolidate its newfound role and mission in the region. It is predicated on the assessment that, starting in July 2020, Turkey became more proactive and involved in the region, which in turn laid the foundation for a game-changing development; Turkey's stature then grew even further in the wake of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia that ended the Second Karabakh War. Now Ankara is taking on a balancing role—if not quite a mediating one—in the region.

The situation is not straightforward: the well-consolidated empowerment of the Russian Federation in the wake of the war has ensured its continuing status as the main mediator in conflict resolution as well as open the possibility for it to become a genuine peacemaker. Turkey is considered the main balancing power to potentially check or restrain Russia's dominant position, at least down the road. But for now, Russia can be considered as “being fully back” on the ground: its armed forces are present in each of the three South Caucasus states—by invitation or otherwise. This lends a certain pallor of instability to the newly achieved status quo, although this is not widely recognized, much less pronounced in Turkey and in Azerbaijan.

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It is thus too early to speak about full-on regional *integration*, which will take time to bring about. Yet already today there is potential for the realization of regional *cooperation*. The ideas related to the latter are being discussed in various fora, yet the feasibility of the implementation of these ideas remains open to interpretation.

'Othering'

Cooperation in trade and transport is often said to constitute an initial step for building up mechanisms and taking actions. But any efforts in this regard should be considered in light of the willingness of Azerbaijanis to enjoy their victory and that of the Armenians to digest their defeat. Still, we repeat, one can observe the onset of a new status quo, which has a strong potential to endure and become desirable. This is predicated on several factors. Azerbaijan is taking stock of the liberation of its occupied territories, the restoration of its territorial integrity, and the consolidation of its

nation- and state-building processes. The launch of rapid and wide-ranging reconstruction efforts in Karabakh subsequent to the Second Karabakh War further contributed to the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereign rights and demonstrated Baku's full control over Karabakh. This brings us to the other main factor. It seems that Armenia—or, at the very least, the Armenian government headed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan—is in the process of earnestly digesting at least some of the consequences of its defeat.

That being said, the role of memory should not be underestimated. The legacy of enmity, conflict, and war obviously still exists. Built up over three decades of frozen conflict, elites and societal actors in both Armenia and Azerbaijan fostered feelings of 'othering'—by which is meant “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities” (the definition is provided by the two originators of

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this conceptual framework, John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian of the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley).

Recourse to this contemporary sociological concept helps explain why the restoration of some sort of state of cohabitation, such as existed in the Tsarist or Soviet periods, will be difficult to achieve in the short and even medium term. Even the normalization of relations between two states will not alter this situation fully: for Baku the conflict is over, the Karabakh Armenians are citizens of Azerbaijan, and no special status will be forthcoming; for Yerevan, the status of Karabakh Armenians is yet to be determined, and this determination-to-come should involve international actors.

A number of practical framing questions concerning regional cooperation remain unanswered. Two of the most important are, one, what will be the regional cooperation mechanisms? And

two, who will be the actor(s) that will lead the process of internationalization?

The only option currently on the table is what we can call the pacting of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia with Turkey, Russia, and Iran. This is what is conventionally termed the 3+3 format. However, 3+3 is questionable not only in its potential to be a sustainable mechanism but also to be an effective one. In thinking through the feasibility of this would-be pact, as it were, the issue of the durability of the present coalition between Turkey and Russia needs to be considered: after all, Ankara and Moscow have competing foreign policies in the Middle East and perhaps elsewhere. Thus, their competitive cooperation lies in a delicate balance.

Moreover, also in the context of this potential pacting, the reticence of Georgia is evident: the country whose territorial integrity has been violated by Russia continues to remain strongly committed to a

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path of integration into Western political and security structures—i.e., NATO and the EU. As a consequence, Tbilisi remains reluctant to join 3+3 and has formally distanced itself from its realization. Thus, it declined to participate in the inaugural foreign ministerial meeting of what was touted as being 3+3 (but instead ended up being 2+3) that took place in Moscow on 10 December 2021.

It seems that both Azerbaijan and Turkey will invest considerable efforts in attempting to convince Georgia to engage within this regional format. Success is far from certain but may be more easily attainable in the event that Western actors become involved, which would make Georgia more comfortable. But this, of course, would present its own set of challenges. In the meantime, 3+3 remains contested.

Another issue is the absence of a formal bilateral relationship between Turkey and Armenia. The need to normalize

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ties between the two states has been voiced regularly since the end of the Second Karabakh War. In December 2021, a first concrete step was taken when both countries appointed special envoys to lead talks on this issue. As of this writing, however, the terms and conditions for normalization have yet to be determined.

This task is neither easy nor straightforward. Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, has underlined that Ankara is proceeding in full and open consultation with Baku on this issue—a political choice that seems to signal a Turkish disinclination to act independently of Azerbaijan. That being said, even if Baku were to announce its unconditional consent to Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, historical legacies and memories would not be overcome easily—further evidence of the potency of the 'othering' concept.

In the post-Second Karabakh War environment, Turkey has become more proactive in the South Caucasus, further increasing

its clout in shaping matters related to the geopolitical situation: a game-changer. Meanwhile, Russia has openly restored its position as the region's main game-setter—becoming again the decisive actor of the region.

In contrast, the OSCE Minsk Group has become even more ineffective. It is anyone's guess when and even if this format will be revived from what is effectually a state of hibernation, although a case may be made that its return to the regional scene could help build some trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As of this writing, however, no concrete proposal has been forthcoming from its Co-chairs. This issue will again be addressed below, briefly.

Contextualization

The Turkish position and Ankara's role in the postwar context should be analyzed within this context of and with reference to patterns of continuity and change in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Political, intellectual, and civil society elites mainly associate regional cooperation with the following themes: security, respect for protection of territorial integrity, difference, and similarities. This implies that possibilities

for regional cooperation should address both historical and existing threats to security—whether real or perceived—amongst regional actors; to what extent differences (e.g., ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious) can be accommodated, acknowledged, and overcome where possible; and to what extent similarities can be emphasized and common interests found. In addition, scenarios envisaging the patterns of regional cooperation and possibilities for regional integration should acknowledge not only territorial borders but also the relevance and prevalence of cultural and psychological borders. These are largely informed by the legacies of the past, by facts and events shaping historical memory, and by conflicts from the post-Soviet period. Again, this points to the potency of the 'othering' concept.

When the Cold War came to an end, the Turkish state model—a democratic, secular, Muslim nation-state—was held up as a successful governance model that could be emulated in whole or in part by former Soviet republics. It was certainly promoted as such by Western actors in order to decrease the potential influence of Iran and the existing one emanating from Russia. Turkey, in other words, was considered a useful and reliable country for the promotion of Western interests.

The collapse of the Soviet Union drew not only new political borders but also cultural ones. Cultural borders were reinterpreted and redefined within the framework of new discourses on nation- and state-building in which friends and foes were redefined.

Cultural borders did not overlap with political borders. These last became more value-loaded by virtue of the fact that they underlined similarities, affinities, shared and inter-

acted experiences, common history, common destiny, and shared culture and language between national or ethnic groups. This was particularly valid for Azerbaijan and Turkey, whereas for the Armenians it represented a threat, enmity, and conflict. This in turn becomes a major obstacle to overcome for all parties in the establishment of platforms and mechanisms for regional cooperation and/or integration.

From today's perspective, any potential framework for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus should particularly refer to the Russian factor. Moscow's political and cultural influence is still dominant in the region—a fact that is very likely to endure

into the future. However, the Russian factor also symbolizes the past and the previous regime-type. In the present situation, the proactive involvement of Turkey seems to counterbalance the Russian factor and gives Azerbaijanis, in partic-

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ular, a feeling of security. Yet, as has already been mentioned, the currently harmonious relationship between Russia and Turkey also lies in a delicate balance. This does not imply that the

Turkish political elite would ever consider decreasing Ankara's support to Baku; quite the contrary: it prefers to perpetuate the existing status quo for as long as possible. Still, the Russian factor is yet to be taken into fully account.

The potential involvement of Western actors in the South Caucasus is seen as useful in order to decrease the decisive power of the Russian Federation. Yet three questions remain unanswered: which Western actors would wish to get involved? By which mechanisms would they do so? Using which tools? To this one could add both the relative silence and lack of presence of Western countries and institutions. Furthermore, the

issue of Western effectiveness is at issue, which in turn decreases reliance on them, particularly from the perspective of Azerbaijan. Turkey, in this context, is free to enjoy its proactive position as the major supporter of the Azerbaijani victory. In addition, Ankara can be confident that it has consolidated its status as one of the two regional actors in the South Caucasus with which any Western counterparts will need to parlay.

Turkey is thus seen by Baku as a reliable ally—a friendly and brotherly nation and state. Yet Ankara has not managed to foster anything truly resembling a regional identity; instead, it has intensified bilateral relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. The pacting of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey is a good example of partial regional cooperation. However, regional problems overshadow the potential for regional integration. Violations of the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine engender feelings of insecurity.

For the Turkish political and intellectual elite, the triangular relationship between Ankara, Baku, and Yerevan is not very complex. Turkey's closing of its border with Armenia is considered as an "exceptional yet natural act" designed to strengthen the

position of brotherly Azerbaijan in its quest to get back its occupied territories, which has now taken place. Thus, in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan seems to have given its consent to Turkey for the normalization of its relations with Armenia. Yet the terms and conditions for both parties remain rather vague. From the Turkish perspective, the political, cultural, and psychological borders with Armenia are solid, which implicitly fosters mental and emotional barriers whilst consolidating enduring prejudices.

This perception is reciprocated by the Armenian side. The previous process of normalization between Armenia and Turkey had ended in failure (it began in September 2008 with "football diplomacy" and culminated in the October 2009 signing of the Zurich Protocols before being canceled). This not only resulted in a serious crisis in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, but it also proved to be an ineffective way forward. And now, having won the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan seems to have given not only its consent but even its approval to Turkey to go ahead once more.

The Second Karabakh War was also a test for Turkey: to see whether it could strengthen its role in its immediate neighborhood and become

a more prominent security actor. It seems that Turkey restored its position as one of the two leading countries, along with Russia. This may very well be the result of some sort of understanding Ankara has reached with Moscow. Yet it is not easy to predict how long this *entente cordiale* can last.

Azerbaijan is now more confident and more powerful in the region in the wake of having restored its territorial integrity. Ankara sees the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey as having been deepened, which in turn signifies that interdependence has been intensified significantly. Both countries openly declare that they will "act as one" in defining priorities and interests in the South Caucasus.

This needs to be put alongside the trilateral relationship between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia, which has been called "exemplary," "promising," and "groundbreaking." It too is often said to be a strategic partnership, yet the connotations of that relationship go beyond the notion of shared strategic goals. From the Turkish perspective, it is rather an act of solidarity to respect the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia, which has the added benefit of further intensifying Ankara's energy politics.

Still, the future of the region remains unpredictable and fragile. The question is how this fragile condition can be accommodated by regional countries, particularly in the context where the presence of the West remains limited and obscure. Hence the fact that 3+3 remains the sole proposed format to advance regional cooperation. Its feasibility is questionable because a genuine and practical commitment for normalization and reconciliation efforts is yet to be seen.

Both scholars and policymakers have spoken positively about confidence-building measures and dialogue for cooperation—and that the parties involved underline the importance of regional connectivity, economic development, and initiatives in transportation and trade. Yet remaining unaddressed is the issue of how its predicate—the building up of sufficient trust to get any of this off the ground—would be achieved.

Regionalization and Normalization

The new geopolitical context established after the Second Karabakh War is rather regionalized: Turkey and Russia (and with a lesser extent Iran) have consolidated their respective spheres of

influence whereby each aligns with one or two South Caucasian countries but none with all of them. Added to this geopolitical reality is the fact that Western actors are currently less visible, less viable, and less effective than they have been in decades.

As noted above, the most consolidated relationship is between Azerbaijan and Turkey, with both countries benefiting from their strategic partnership: indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the 2020 victory is commonly enjoyed. The motto “one nation, two states” constitutes the basis of the bilateral relationship, which is also backed up with very strong societal support in both countries. Popular feelings of both empathy and sympathy reached their peak during the Second Karabakh War, of course. Both societies not only share cultural commonalities but are now also emotionally tied to each other. Interestingly, however, even this partnership could be further consolidated through strengthened institutionalization.

Furthermore, the triangular relationship between Azerbaijan,

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Georgia, and Turkey can become one of the pillars of regional integration by broadening enhanced cooperation and helping to reduce the effects of ‘othering’ on the region’s cultural and psychological borders. Yet, as noted above, Georgia seems to be hesitant to engage in any type of cooperation mechanism in which Russia is involved.

Turkey’s involvement as a proactive and game-changer actor during and after the Second Karabakh War was and remains unanimously supported by the country’s political and intellectual elite, as well as by a wide range of societal actors. Turkish policymakers seem to enjoy their leading and decisive position in the region.

As of January 2022, Russia and Turkey are in cooperation rather than in competition in the South Caucasus. Yet, as argued above, this is a delicate balance to sustain.

To achieve comprehensive cooperation schemes, the dual principle of the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of states will need to be respected by all parties involved. The violation

of the territorial integrity of both Georgia and Ukraine constitute the biggest challenge for regional cohesion, regional stability, and regional unity. Trade and transport appear to be the most relevant areas to initiate regional cooperation. Yet the discourse of nation- and state-building, as well as the re-definition of friends and foes, will have a decisive role in determining the feasibility of the implementation of any type of projects. Overcoming the hatred born of ‘othering’ may take much longer than expected.

The normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia is now on the table, as has been discussed above. The appointment of special envoys is of considerable importance as a symbol of the commitment both countries to invest time and effort to build up to the achievement of a “normal” relationship. However, this will not be an easy task, bearing in mind the historically deeply-rooted enmity that exists between the two nations. The lack of trust is almost total. It seems that good will and good intentions at the political top in both countries can provide the only solid ground to initiate that bilateral relationship, taking into account the potential

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for public resentment and backlash present in both countries. It should be noted that talks on normalization were expected to begin after the Second Karabakh War, yet the terms and conditions for their commencement have yet to be set. A gradual and cautious process is the likely trajectory: we can therefore expect a slow process of normalization rather than a rush to launch an unsubstantiated dialogue.

This process will not simply involve Armenia and Turkey. Any discussion on normalization and how it may evolve will almost certainly take into account Azerbaijani perspectives and the position of Russia. As has been mentioned, Azerbaijan seems to have given its provisional consent—and this time, Ankara will very carefully consult with Baku. That being said, the Russian position is less well-known. Thus, the process of peacebuilding in the region will also inform the fate of normalization. Given Armenia’s reliance on Russia and the presence of Russian troops in the South Caucasus—including in the Karabakh peacekeeping zone—Moscow’s stance on normalization will be crucial. So far, there is not much evidence from the Russian

side whether it will be for or against the normalization process.

One should also acknowledge and address to the role of memory and the identity dimension in the process of normalization. ‘Othering’, hostility, and feelings of enmity dominate reciprocal perceptions. Although the political elites in both countries are committed to normalizing the bilateral relationship, overcoming stereotypes and prejudices has long way to go. A getting-to-know-each-other process can be realized through the help of soft power actors such as civil society organizations and academia. Therefore, policymakers will need to consider ways to overcome potential societal resentment and to integrate the societal dimension of normalization into their agenda-setting framework. Additionally, both Azerbaijan and Turkey need to keep benefiting from their alliance with Georgia, which should not be excluded from nascent cooperation mechanisms. Tbilisi’s caution and reluctance to involve itself in any kind of cooperation with Moscow, and its desire to become more integrated into Western

structures, should be somehow accommodated.

Coming Out on Top

The South Caucasus still remains fragile and the likelihood of achieving serious regional cooperation is not easy to forecast. There is a need to build up trust, overcome hostilities, and demonstrate goodwill and genuine commitment for peaceful coexistence in a stable and secure region. Issues related to the perceptions of stability and security—being, as they are, overwhelmingly domestic matters—have also become regionalized, given the active involvement of Turkey and Russia as regional powers.

During and after the Second Karabakh War, the South Caucasus experienced what may very well be its least internationalized period since the collapse of the Soviet Union: the only outside powers that truly matter are Turkey and Russia. In any type of regional integration projects, Turkey is unlikely to face significant challenges due not only to its strategic partner-

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ship with Azerbaijan and Georgia but also because of the geopolitical context whereby it is in a state of collaboration with Russia. The Russian position, on the other hand, is a little more challenging, given Georgia’s stance towards its northern neighbor.

One of the biggest challenges for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus is that no bilateral relationship is purely bilateral; rather, each is susceptible to being influenced by a series of factors informed by the choices made by regional and insider countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), regional but outsider countries (Iran, Russia, Turkey), and the West (the EU and its member states, the United States). The nature of all these interrelationships is both ambivalent and complex, given the series of factors that can influence bilateral and multilateral relations—as noted above, the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey is a case in point.

Even under the Biden Administration, America remains

reluctant to deal directly with regional matters. This is to be contrasted with the EU, which has over the past few months begun to signal that it wishes to play a more hands-on role in regional affairs. EUSR for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia Toivo Klaar, paid visits to the region after the war. And, of course, there was the fruitful meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Brussels on 15 December 2021—which involved the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel—during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels. This may come to be seen as a crucial moment in the EU’s ambition to become involved in the peacebuilding process.

Given the EU’s poor record in dealing with the conflict over Karabakh, its rather slow and cumbersome decisionmaking processes, and its plentiful but rigidly structured toolkit of confidence- and peace-building instruments, it remains to be seen how effective Brussels can be. A good start would

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involve doing more than issuing statements or expressing concerns: putting forward new policies that gain the region's consent—that is, policies that actually contribute to ensuring stability and security on the ground—surely would be welcome. The Minsk Group brand enjoys such a poor reputation, and this is unlikely to change. The EU, on the other hand, may be able to play a constructive role—again, if it can muster the wherewithal to be effective.

Greater EU engagement could provide the region's countries with an opportunity to sit at a different kind of table—one that would balance the strong position of Russia, made even more so in the wake of the Second Karabakh War. As things stand, the sole balancer is Turkey, particularly within the context of Azerbaijan. But this may not be enough. Turkey's great commitment to build up regional connectivity through trade and transport should be backed by a strong one from the EU, as a way to help overcome existing fragilities in the region.

Like its regional counterparts, Turkey does not stand in a neutral position in the South Caucasus. Its special, exceptional, and privileged partnership with

Azerbaijan provides strong opportunities for both countries to further deepen their bilateral ties not only in areas like the economy, trade, transport, culture, education, and intersocietal dialogue, but also in the defense and military sectors. As for its relations with Armenia, it seems that the road to normalization is open, although the ride promises to be bumpy. By virtue of its strategic partnership with Georgia, Turkey should continue to support the restoration of the country's territorial integrity whilst deepening its bilateral ties through further institutionalization. Given Georgia's devoted aspirations to move closer to Western institutions, Brussels' heightened engagement in the South Caucasus could boost Tbilisi's enthusiasm, commitment, and support for regional connectivity projects.

Turkey's entry into the region as a proactive and game-changer actor shows that it will be part of major projects for regional interaction and cooperation. Ankara's new posture in the South Caucasus is strongly supported by Baku—which prioritizes Turkey in all regional matters—provides it with a unique opportunity to consolidate its position as the sole major actor that can effectively counterbalance the Russian factor. **BD**



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