

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# Prospects for Pax Caucasia?

## The 3+3 Regional Cooperation Initiative

*Vasif Huseynov*

The 3+3 format for regional cooperation is an initiative that was first proposed by the leaders of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, building somewhat on an idea that originated in Iran during the war itself. This grouping covers the three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) plus the three most important countries neighboring this region (Russia, Turkey, and Iran).

Thus in December 2020, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the initiative at a joint press conference with his Azerbaijani counterpart, President Ilham Aliyev, during his visit to Baku in which he reviewed the military parade marking Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the aforementioned

war—a war that heralded the fundamental transformation of regional geopolitical and geo-economic realities. On this occasion, Erdoğan called 3+3 a win-win initiative for all actors in the region. Given its obvious potential to promote peace and security in the South Caucasus and facilitate the normalization of relations between former belligerents, some local experts believe that the 3+3 initiative could be instrumental for the emergence of Pax Caucasia.

Four of the six countries immediately reacted positively to the initiative, with Armenia and Georgia expressing some reservation. While Armenia initially sounded skeptical, the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan eventually confirmed its participation in this format. For now, the

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only country that retains distance from the Pax Caucasia process is Georgia which, due to its ongoing territorial dispute with Russia, refuses to participate in this platform and proposes an alternative 3+2 format (the countries of the South Caucasus + the EU and the United States).

Tbilisi has called its counterproposal the “Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative” but has taken no concrete action to set it in motion. Neither Aliyev nor Pashinyan have yet to publicly comment on the 3+2 format. Others have also remained silent. Hence, the likelihood it can prevail over the 3+3 framework in geopolitical substance is low, given that it excludes major active regional players like Russia and Turkey and substitutes them with two Western actors that are evidently less engaged in the region. The advent of the present phase of the conflict over Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, has also not increased the prospects of the Georgian idea being adopted, either.

Meanwhile, the Georgian leaders acknowledged that it would be “necessary” to participate in regional geopolitical projects “in some

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form.” This has been widely interpreted as Tbilisi's nodding to possibly take part in the 3+3 format. However, given that Georgia has not decided to

so yet, the discussions at the moment are being held in the 2+3 format (Armenia and Azerbaijan plus Russia, Turkey, and Iran). Nevertheless, the initiative continues to be widely called 3+3 by both regional media outlets as well as state officials and the expert community—the idea being that this maintains the hope or expectation that sooner or later Georgia will join the club.

The 3+3 initiative is reminiscent of some cooperation projects proposed by regional actors soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such attempts previously failed due to several reasons, among others, because Armenia and Azerbaijan refused to cooperate with each other for as long as the conflict over Karabakh remained unresolved, i.e., for as long as Armenia continued to occupy territories belonging to Azerbaijan. Given the liberation of these territories that was a result of the Second Karabakh War (as enshrined in the 10 November 2022 tripartite statement between Armenia,

Azerbaijan, and Russia), the regional circumstances have changed, which has provided auspicious grounds for the implementation of all-inclusive cooperation projects. The 3+3 initiative is one such project that can serve as a platform for the peaceful resolution of the disputes amongst the member countries and for negotiations regarding the (re) opening of all regional transportation and communication links. This has the potential to promote economic and political cooperation in the context of the countries concerned in the face of regional and global challenges. In terms of the bottom line, 3+3 may perhaps come to be seen as the regional flagship project that established a much longed-for Pax Caucasia.

This essay examines the 3+3 regional cooperation platform initiative from various analytical perspectives. It first analyses the historical evolution of the idea of the 3+3 initiative, in light of previous proposal that could not be implemented in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Second, it examines the transformation of regional geopolitics in and around the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War, which promises to be conducive to the realization of the Pax Caucasia vision. Finally, the essay explores the opportunities on offer by the

3+3 platform and the challenges this initiative is presently facing. It concludes with some policy recommendations for the governments of 3+3 members.

### *Enduring Goal of the Post-Soviet Period*

In the late 1990s, the political leaders of the South Caucasus and some surrounding states concluded that it was necessary to bring the regional countries together under the umbrella of some sort of regional structure and create a solid basis for cooperation amongst them based on the mutual respect to each other's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. This was seen as an opportunity to achieve peace and security and unleash the region's full potential for economic development in the context of broader post-Soviet transition plans.

One of the first moves in this direction was made by the former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze in the second half of 1990s. In proposing the establishment of a "Peaceful Caucasus," Shevardnadze was seeking to push for more inclusive and deeper cooperation between the lands of the Caucasus (both southern and northern parts of the Caucasus). Although this idea failed to take

hold in practice, it pioneered future discussions regarding regional frameworks.

Thus, for example, at the Istanbul summit of the OSCE in November 1999, President Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan proposed the creation of a pact to resolve regional problems and ensure peace, security, and stability in the South Caucasus. His idea was supported by President Süleyman Demirel of Turkey, who developed a broader proposal and communicated the nascent concept to the state leaders of the region. President Robert Kocharyan of Armenia and President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia joined the initiative.

This proposal, which was ultimately named the "Caucasus Stability Pact," was more outward-looking. The idea was to build an organization on the basis of a 3+3+2 format, which would have included the European Union and the United States along with the countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and neighboring region (Russia, Iran, and Turkey). The initiators were proposing to include security and conflict resolution issues along with economic cooperation and democratic reforms as thematic issues. President Heydar Aliyev underscored that "the countries of the South Caucasus

must enter the twenty-first century free from all conflicts and confrontations and accept their own Pact for Security and Peace."

However, despite this understanding on the necessity of establishing a pact for peace, security, and stability in the South Caucasus, there was a major impediment that was at the time not possible to overcome. President Heydar Aliyev declared that "there is one condition" for the realization of these proposals: "It is the solution of the conflicts in the Southern Caucasus in the first place [...]. Armenia must liberate the occupied territories of Azerbaijan and over one million Azerbaijani IDPs must return home." The sides, unfortunately, failed to reach a breakthrough in the settlement of the conflict over Karabakh. For Azerbaijan, it was unacceptable to build any kind of relations with Armenia so long as 20 percent of the country's internationally recognized territories remained under its illegal occupation.

Another impediment to the "Caucasus Stability Pact" initiative was posed by the rejection of the European Union to participate in this project. In 2006, having just put forward its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the EU stated that this instrument would make a separate Stability Pact redundant. For example, in his remarks at a hearing

of the Political Affairs Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 12 May 2006, senior EU Commission official Robert Liddell said this proposal did not promise any added-value for the EU's existing policy: "I don't see much difference between what people are talking about in the Stability Pact and what the ENP is offering." Moreover, in the post-Shevardnadze period, Georgia lost interest in the initiative as well. Fearing that this framework would bog the country down, in terms of perception, in the political boundaries of the South Caucasus, the Georgian government refused to join the initiative. Salome Samadashvili, Georgia's ambassador to the EU, in the aforementioned hearing conducted by the Council of Europe, said her country "will not be captive to any regional approach, and Georgian society will move forward steadily on the course which it has chosen [namely, pursuing closer links with the EU and NATO]." Thus, in early 2000s, some of the stakeholders targeted by the

"Caucasus Stability Pact" proposal were lukewarm in their support to the idea, though for different reasons.

The idea of a stability and cooperation platform in the Caucasus came back to the agenda of regional politics in 2008, after the Georgia-Russia war. This time, the progenitor was Erdoğan. Discussing this with Russia's President Dmitry

Medvedev, he proposed to develop cooperation between Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey in a "five" or "3 + 2" format. Medvedev supported the idea, describing it as an "opportunity to conduct a denser, sometimes informal dialogue, to contribute to the solution of economic, transport, and energy problems of the region."

But again, the proposal could not get off the ground at the time either because of the contradicting priorities of the regional states in foreign policy or the challenges posed by the unresolved conflict over Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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## Transformation of Regional Geopolitics

The 10 November 2020 tripartite agreement for all intents and purposes put an end to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenian forces, and, as such, opened a unique window of opportunity to revive the idea behind the South Caucasus peace initiatives put forward by the previous generation of regional leaders. Azerbaijan's official recognition of the conflict as "resolved" and Armenia's agreement to the codification of the state border between the two countries based on Soviet-era maps raise hopes that the two countries will be able to overcome their longstanding enmity, and restart commercial, societal, and diplomatic relations. This would pave the way for Baku and Yerevan to play leading roles in the establishment of a Pax Caucasia.

The resolution of the conflict over Karabakh and the commitment contained in the tripartite statement to (re)establish transport and communication links in the region is indeed a notable chance to set in motion a virtuous circle of economic, political, and societal developments. The envisioned transportation projects, in particular the Zangezur corridor, constitutes

the core of the 3+3 initiative. The Zangezur corridor will not only connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave through the southern part of Armenia but also will provide a transportation link between other members of the 3+3 group. Armenia will gain ease of access to Iran and Russia through the territories of Azerbaijan, thanks to this corridor. The corridor will also provide a stable overland communication between two major regional powers: Turkey and Russia. By connecting the 3+3 members through infrastructure, the Zangezur corridor will open up an opportunity for their political rapprochement and the deepening of economic cooperation.

In a recent deal with Iran on 11 March 2022, Azerbaijan obtained an alternative route to the Zangezur corridor, which in turn markedly strengthened Azerbaijan's negotiating position with Armenia. The memorandum of understanding signed by the two states in Baku mapped out a plan to establish new transport and electricity connections to link the western part of mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave via Iran's northwestern region. In a way similar to the Zangezur Corridor (approximately 43 km), the trans-Iranian route (55 km) is also supposed to include both railway and motorway links in

addition to communication and electricity connections. This new route is planned to be constructed in proximity to the Iranian-Armenian state border and will generally mirror the Zangezur corridor. As a result of the new realities created by the Iran-Azerbaijan deal, Armenia now finds itself in a position of needing the implementation of the Zangezur corridor much more than Azerbaijan. Hence, it stands to reason that Armenia will demonstrate more interest in the Zangezur project and its speedy implementation in the future. Otherwise, it will lose out to the economic benefits that the Zangezur corridor project was designed to provide in the first place.

Of course, the new agreement between Iran and Azerbaijan that provides a direct alternative to the Zangezur corridor is of huge importance for the Azerbaijani side, as well. Nevertheless, it does not mean that Azerbaijan has abandoned its plans to build a transportation passage through southern Armenia. The bottom line is that both the Zangezur corridor and the trans-Iranian corridor will provide

a practical basis for substantive talks on the establishment of a regional cooperation platform.

“We must create a new platform for cooperation in the region,” Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev stated at the 10 December 2020 press conference with his Turkish coun-

terpart in Baku. The suggestion he made on that occasion was to combine the various existing trilateral cooperation platforms in the region (Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia, Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran, Turkey-

Russia-Iran), thus uniting them into a single six-party framework with the addition of Armenia. Inviting Yerevan to join such a new initiative, President Aliyev noted that “if the Armenian leadership draws the right conclusions from the war, renounces its unfounded claims and looks ahead, then [the Armenians] can also take a place on this platform. We are open to this [...]. We must turn this page over; we must end the enmity.”

Although revanchist political groups are still powerful in postwar Armenia and call for rapid (re)armament and for preparing for

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a new war against Azerbaijan, the country’s leaders have never ruled out Yerevan’s participation in the 3+3 format. For Armenia, being rather dependent on Russia in terms of security and economy, it would be inadmissible to stay out of a flagship project that is promoted by its major ally. Pashinyan’s government, however, has insisted that the 3+3 initiative should not replicate already existing formats. “For example, the Armenian prime minister said in an online press conference in November 2021, “we do not discuss the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh issue, for which there is the format of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs, in the 3+3 format. Next, we have a trilateral commission working on the opening of the regional communications and this issue should not be discussed within the 3+3 format as well. Issues that are key and are not discussed in already existing formats should be discussed. Is it possible to formulate such issues? We will live to see,” added Pashinyan.

Although the results of the Second Karabakh War were seen by many as signaling a decline of the influence

of both Russia and Iran in the region (to the advantage of Turkey, whose presence is understood to be increasing), this has not led to any confrontation, as had been expected. The three powers have so far managed to remain on amicable terms, rather than engage in the pursuit of maximalist objectives, which would have the effect of undermining peace and stability in the South Caucasus. This situation creates a good basis for the realization of the 3+3 initiative.

For Russia, the existing status quo is acceptable, as it has deployed its troops to the territories of Azerbaijan: the only country in the South Caucasus that did not have a Russian military presence in recent years. This gives Russia important leverage to safeguard its authority over regional politics for the foreseeable future.

Hence, Moscow does not view the present state of the Azerbaijan-Turkey bilateral relationship as a threat. On this account, the Kremlin supports the 3+3 initiative and finds it useful to put forward regional solutions to the problems and challenges of the region.

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For its part, Azerbaijan's multi-lateral approach in foreign policy serves as a geopolitical bridge between Russia and Turkey and is instrumental in the promotion of a regional cooperative environment. In fact, President Ilham Aliyev has described cooperation between Russia and Turkey in the south Caucasus as a "provider of security" in the new geopolitical configuration that has arisen in the wake of the Second Karabakh War, stating in October 2021 that the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Russia axis will be the core of the new cooperation platform.

For Iran, the 3+3 format represents an instrument to remain engaged with the South Caucasus and thus affect regional political and economic processes. This is of great importance for Tehran as some outcomes of the Second Karabakh War—e.g., the growing role of Turkey in the region, the Zangezur corridor initiative, and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers proximate to the Iranian border—were interpreted by some Iranian observers as a threat to the country's national interests. Iran was largely seen as a relative loser of the Second Karabakh War.

As The Heritage Foundation's Luke Coffey has written, Iran did not welcome the sudden change in the status quo between Armenia

and Azerbaijan as, *inter alia*, the resulting new realities could deprive Tehran of some sources of income and tools that it traditionally used as leverage in its policies towards both Armenia and Azerbaijan. But Iran has had to adjust to the new situation and grasp any opportunity offered. The 3+3 initiative is seen such an opportunity. Hence, Iranian Then-Foreign Minister Javad Zarif emphasized in January 2021 during a diplomatic tour of all 3+3 candidate countries that "we are looking to form a six-party cooperation union in the region, and it is the most important goal of this regional trip." The aforementioned March 2022 deal between Baku and Tehran was another important development that assuaged the latter country's concerns regarding some potentially negative consequences of the building of the Zangezur corridor by providing necessary opportunities for Iran to become part of the transit hub emerging in its northern neighborhood.

The 3+3 platform is seen by Turkey as an instrument to help the region's three countries find common ground for peaceful cooperation to the benefit of all six countries. For Erdoğan, the regional states "can achieve reconciliation with this platform," which would include infrastructure, political, diplomatic, and many other issues. As opposed to the expectations of some analysts made

during the Second Karabakh War, Turkey did not pursue maximalist objectives and avoided making moves that would threaten Russia or Iran. Instead, Ankara sought to play a constructive role in the quick restoration of peace and stability in the region after the war. The efforts towards the normalization of the Armenia-Turkey relations and the reopening of borders between the two states will make a critical contribution to the restoration of peace in the region and, in turn, to the actualization of the 3+3 initiative.

### Challenges and Opportunities

The 3+3 platform has already begun to be operationalized. The group held its first meeting on 10 December 2021 in Moscow. The meeting was attended by the deputy foreign ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Turkey and the Director General of Iran's foreign ministry. The representatives of Georgia rejected the invitation to the meeting and chose not to attend at any level. Despite the absence of Tbilisi, in statements made by Kremlin officials other participants concerning this meeting, they referred to it as having taken place in a "3+3" format and expressed hope that Georgia would join soon, making it clear that "the door remains open."

This message was reiterated by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu when he announced that the next meeting of the group will be held in Turkey, adding that Ankara believes Georgia will attend the upcoming meeting. As of this writing, however, Georgia's position remains unchanged. "Georgia will definitely not attend the 3+3 meeting," said Georgia's ambassador to Turkey, George Janjgava, to the Turkish media in early January 2022. Although we see Turkey and Azerbaijan as "strategic partners" and Armenia as a "historical and good neighbor," he added, "Russia is a country that is occupying 20 percent of Georgian territory."

Georgia's conflict with Russia is, therefore, one of the major challenges that the Pax Caucasia process encounters at the moment. It is a challenge not only because it prevents Georgia's participation in the 3+3 format, but also—and perhaps more importantly—because it prevents the establishment of completely peaceful environment in the region. Although a new war between Russia and Georgia is not expected anytime soon, violent escalations cannot be ruled out in the future. The 3+3 format might actually serve as a platform for the normalization of Georgia's relations with Russia and could deliver some breakthrough towards the settlement of

the conflict. If Georgia treats it as an opportunity to normalize relations with Russia and break the deadlock in their conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a policy change may occur in the country's attitude to the initiative.

Present rivalries and distrust between most participating countries (e.g., Russia-Turkey, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Armenia-Turkey, Turkey-Iran, and Iran-Azerbaijan), whether in the context of the South Caucasus or elsewhere, is another factor that would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the group to come together under one umbrella for an extended period of time.

Moreover, the fate of the Pax Caucasia initiative is inextricably linked with the success of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, the complete implementation of the 10 November 2020 trilateral statement, and successful normalization of the Turkey-Armenia relations.

The sincerity of the interest of both Tehran and Moscow in fostering peace and stability in the South Caucasus is another factor that will be necessary to

gauge in advancing the likelihood of success of the six-nation initiative.

It is important to note that participating 3+3 countries declare their interest to overcome the hostile atmosphere in the region and look for shared solutions to the problems that they face.

Time will show if they can realize this in practice.

Another challenge is the lack of a certainty of the agenda on which the platform would be built. The first 3+3 meeting did not reveal the issues that would be on the agenda of the platform. For now, it seems that the reopening of the regional transportation routes is going to be the main focus of the initiative. However, it is questionable whether this solely would suffice for the platform to become a sustainable regional mechanism to contribute to peace and security in the region.

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This appears to be an explicit concern for the Azerbaijani side, for instance. President Ilham Aliyev, in an interview with the Azerbaijani media on 12 January 2022, characterized the 10 December 2021

meeting of the 3+3 platform as "introductory" and said he expects subsequent meetings to focus more on concrete issues like the reopening of regional transportation routes and other cooperation areas. It is indeed important for the group to clearly define a roadmap and

agenda for their future activities. The participating countries should not refrain from setting ambitious goals, including some sort of institutionalization of 3+3 and launching more projects to deepen economic, humanitarian, and political cooperation.

### *Realization at Last?*

The opportunities for the realization of the Pax Caucasia initiative and the benefits it promises for the future of the region can be manifold. This would create a security situation in the South Caucasus that has never existed before in the history of the region. The external powers, which have traditionally competed for influence in

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the region, used to manipulate conflicts taking place between the region's countries, playing them off against each other. The Second Karabakh War and the subsequent emergence of the 3+3 initiative, which would bring these powers together in an all-inclusive regional

mechanism for the first time ever, would open a new chapter in the history of the South Caucasus.

Thus, this platform holds significant potential to become not only actualized but even sustainable—unlike previously proposed regional initiatives. Indeed, the 3+3 cooperation platform has been made possible only thanks to the new regional realities that appeared in the South Caucasus in the wake of the Second Karabakh War. In short, the six-nation initiative is an attempt by the regional countries to create a solid basis and relevant mechanisms to cooperate in areas of mutual interest and thereby to produce joint solutions to common problems and challenges. **BD**