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Revitalizing the 3+3 Platform

A Formula for a New Regional Security Order?

Vasif Huseynov

On 23 October 2023, the second meeting of the 3+3 Consultative Regional Platform took place in Tehran, Iran. This platform is built upon the idea of bringing together Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia ‘plus’ Iran, Russia, and Türkiye for regional cooperation had been introduced by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Türkiye after the Second Karabakh War. Georgia, owing to its ongoing territorial conflict with Russia, refused to participate in the platform, though its leaders signaled that they might reconsider this position in the future. The initiative, even in the 2+3 format (i.e., without Georgia), has faced several challenges, including Russia’s war in Ukraine and Iran’s mercurial policies in the region. The first meeting within

this initiative (without Georgia’s participation) was held in Moscow on 10 December 2021 at the level of deputy foreign ministers. At that inaugural meeting, each side expressed optimism regarding the future of this framework.

However, this optimism did not materialize for a long time. While Moscow and Tehran remained supportive of the 3+3 initiative, it mostly lost its relevance and importance for the other actors, including Azerbaijan. Despite repeated announcements by Russian and Iranian officials regarding preparations for the second meeting in this format, it took nearly two years for the meeting to actually occur. According to Russia’s leadership, the West was undermining this initiative.

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Speaking at a 20 March 2023 press conference alongside his Armenian colleague, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that “the West is actively working to destroy this structure [i.e., 3+3].” He added that Russia does not see any possibility or need to cooperate with the West in the South Caucasus and complained that the West infringes on the lawful interests of three close neighbors of the South Caucasus countries, namely Iran, Russia, and Türkiye.

In fact, the major blow to the 3+3 initiative seems to have been struck by Iran rather than the West. Tehran’s increasingly more aggressive policies with respect to Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War, coupled with its overt attempts to undermine Baku’s efforts to open the Zangezur Corridor via Armenian territory, had brought bilateral political and diplomatic relations to a record low. Iran had, thus, nullified all efforts for the advancement of the 3+3 format by countering the Zangezur Corridor project, which represented a core part of this format: development of that passageway was meant to

connect almost all parties within that framework. During an international conference co-organized by ADA University and the AIRCenter on 22 November 2022, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev openly stated that the 3+3 initiative had failed to materialize due to, as he put it, “unfortunately, some Iranian officials’ recent steps and actions are absolutely counterproductive.”

Catalyst for Regional Integration

The regional geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus changed to a great extent following Azerbaijan’s victory over the separatist regime in its Karabakh region and the restoration of the country’s territorial integrity in September 2023. This historic development put an end to the Armenia-Azerbaijan territorial conflict, as it pertained to Karabakh. In a way critical for the establishment of peace and stability in relations between the two countries, the government of Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan refused to intervene in Azerbaijan’s anti-terror

3+3 is built upon the idea of bringing together Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia ‘plus’ Iran, Russia, and Türkiye to advance regional cooperation.

operations against illegal Armenian armed units located in the Russian peacekeeping zone operating in parts of Karabakh. In his address to the nation on 20 September 2023, President Aliyev commended what amounted to Armenia's non-reaction to the military operation in Karabakh and found it constructive for the future of the peace process.

This situation made a positive contribution to regional integration efforts on two fronts: at the 3+3 level and within the trilateral framework involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. President Aliyev, a strong and consistent proponent of substantive regional integration, emphatically highlighted this stance in the same address: "we propose that the future of South Caucasus countries should be based on peace, tranquility, and development. [...] The day is not far when Azerbaijan and Armenia will settle the issues between them, sign a peace treaty, and the countries of the South Caucasus start working on future cooperation in a trilateral format."

This approach is supported by Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili who, in his press conference with President Aliyev following the latter's visit to Tbilisi on 8 October 2023, stated that "our future should be peaceful and

stable, and all three countries of the South Caucasus should address regional issues themselves." President Aliyev expressed his endorsement of this approach, affirming that his country views Georgia also as a more suitable venue for the continuation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks. "Several countries and also some international organizations are trying to support the normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan today. We welcome that. If it is not lop-sided and biased, of course, we welcome any mediation and assistance. However, in my opinion, taking into account both the historical relations and the geographical factor, the most correct option in this field would certainly be Georgia," he said.

In its aftermath, the first-ever meeting amongst the prime ministers of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan took place on 26 October 2023 on the sidelines of the Silk Road Forum in Tbilisi. This was a historic event that raised hopes in the region. The three prime ministers gave positive messages about the future of the region and outlined their proposals towards this goal.

In parallel, a rapprochement began to unfold between Azerbaijan and Iran. During a

ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement hosted by Baku in July 2023, Iran's foreign minister met separately with President Aliyev. The two discussed the increased dynamism of trade and economic ties as well as prospects for developing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and improving communication links between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through Iranian territory, on which the two countries had agreed in March 2022.

Nasser Kanaani, spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, stressed on 11 July 2023 the potential for improved relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. Notably, he pledged Tehran's commitment to ensuring "maximum security" for the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, which had been closed by Azerbaijan following the terrorist attack against the embassy in January 2023. On 17 July 2023, a joint conference of Azerbaijani and Iranian economic cooperation commissions took place in Astara, addressing issues related to the development of regional and international transport connections, including the completion of the Astara cargo terminal by the end of 2024. In early October 2023, Tehran reported that the individual who carried out the terrorist attack

on Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran had been convicted and sentenced to capital punishment.

A couple of days later, on 6 October 2023, Azerbaijan's Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev and Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Mehrdad Bazrpash, took part in a groundbreaking ceremony for a bridge connecting the two countries over the River Aras. This is part of the Azerbaijan-Iran agreement on the establishment of a corridor via Iranian territory that represents an important alternative to the Zangezur Corridor (the route through Iran effectually loops below Armenian territory and is only a few kilometers longer). Hence, Azerbaijan has undertaken to finance the construction of what is coming to be known as the Aras Corridor, which will include both road and rail throughways.

The convening of the second meeting of the 3+3 platform in the wake of these developments was not unexpected. This time, the sides came together at the level of foreign ministers on 23 October 2023. They stressed the "importance of platforms like the Consultative Regional Platform 3+3 in providing opportunities for constructive dialogue and establishing mutually beneficial cooperation between

the countries of the region.” The ministers agreed that the next 3+3 meeting will be held in Türkiye on a date to be specified later. They also confirmed that the platform remains open to Georgia’s participation, though Tbilisi has not indicated any willingness to join.

A New Security Order?

The revitalization of the 3+3 platform after a two-year break coincides with the decline of Russia’s hegemony over the South Caucasus and may characterize a transition to a new regional security order. The war in Ukraine has dealt another blow to what its proponents call a “rules-based liberal international order,” which opened a new chapter in world affairs—with significant implications for the South Caucasus and the rest of the Silk Road region. Facing an unexpected military stalemate in Ukraine and economic troubles at home due to the imposition of a West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime, Russia began to face challenges to its regional aspirations, especially concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Georgia appears to be attempting to find a balance with Russia while seemingly distancing itself from its pro-Western aspirations.

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus that has a territorial conflict with Russia and feels threatened by its northern neighbor. Tbilisi has therefore been attentive to the potential spillover of the conflict over Ukraine into its territory. These security threats have prompted Georgia to reevaluate its foreign policy concerning the EU and the U.S. while reducing its emphasis on aspirations to join NATO. In parallel, the Garibashvili government has attempted to diversify the country’s foreign policy by establishing stronger ties with China and refraining from an all-out confrontation with Russia.

Developments involving Armenia and Azerbaijan exhibited significant differences when compared to those concerning Georgia, marking a trend that can be described as the erosion of the Russia-dominated security order in the region. One pivotal development in this context revolved around the involvement of external actors in advancing the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks. Before the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine, Russia had been the primary mediator in these talks, but in 2022 and 2023, the EU and the United States assumed a more active role (the former identifies itself as a “facilitator,” the latter as a “supporter”).

The Kremlin referred to these actions by Western powers as “geopolitical games,” with the apparent goal of diminishing Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus.

Clearly, Moscow had failed to keep the process under its primary control. The most visible and important manifestation of this failure was the fact that Armenia and Azerbaijan had politically recognized each other’s territorial integrity in the EU-facilitated meeting of the two countries leaders on the sidelines of the inaugural gathering of the European Political Community in Prague on 6 October 2022. This

was followed almost a full year later by Azerbaijan’s aforementioned anti-terror operation, which resulted in the collapse of the ethnic-Armenian secessionist regime and the restoration of Azerbaijan’s full sovereignty over all of Karabakh. Both the recognition by Yerevan that all of Karabakh is a sovereign part of Azerbaijan and the dissolution of the separatist regime were developments that had not been foreseen by the Kremlin, whose representatives were proposing to leave the issue

of the “status of [the] Karabakh region” to future generations.

The decline of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus is also being observed in an increasingly deteriorating relationship between Yerevan and Moscow. There have been a wide range of decisions by the Armenian government over the last two years that have annoyed the Russian leadership.

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These decisions have related both to Armenia’s relations with Russia and the country’s attempts to deepen relations with the West—particularly France and the United States (not coincidentally, these countries host sizeable

and well-organized Armenian diasporas). Yerevan invited the EU to establish a “monitoring mission” to observe the situation on the country’s border with Azerbaijan. In parallel, the Pashinyan government became less and less receptive to the offer of the Russian side to deploy a similar mission under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Nevertheless, Armenia’s exit from the CSTO and the Eurasian

Economic Union (EAEU)—Armenia is a member of both—much less its departure from Russia's orbit altogether, seems quite unlikely. According to Armenian experts, Armenia's multi-sectoral dependence on Russia (particularly in the economic and security domains) makes it “unrealistic to expect that Armenia fundamentally alters its foreign policy orientation towards the West without these dependencies being addressed and mitigated,” as one commentator put it. Hence, it is not surprising that, despite all the above-mentioned tensions, the Pashinyan asserts that his country is not changing its foreign policy vector and does not plan to exit the CSTO and the EAEU. His tactical moves may be better understood as being part of an effort to strike a more equitable balance between the West and Russia; and, as such, to end his country's strategic dependence on Russia. It is far from clear how far he can go or, indeed, whether he can succeed in any strategic sense.

Thus, the confrontation between the West and Russia, coupled with the latter's inability to achieve its battlefield objectives in Ukraine, has prompted the two South Caucasus republics with heretofore one-sided geopolitical orientations (i.e., pro-Russian Armenia and pro-Western Georgia) to attempt

to simulate elements of Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy strategy. Put simply, this strategy entails the pursuit of a neutral (but not passive) stance between the West and Russia, steering clear of provoking either side through excessive alignment with any major power center. With Armenia, however, even the decision to attempt such a policy course has already incurred Russia's antagonism. Given Armenia's extensive reliance on Russia across various domains, Moscow's frustration with Pashinyan's balancing act appears justified.

As observed in earlier sections of this essay, Moscow's decline as a dominant actor in the region is leading to the growing role of other neighboring actors in the affairs of the region. For the major powers neighboring the South Caucasus (Iran, Russia, and, to some extent, Türkiye), the heightened geopolitical and geoeconomic engagement and positioning (both Moscow and Tehran have used the term “encroachment”) of faraway powers in this region is inadmissible and represents a grave national security threat. This was made clear by Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian on 23 October 2023, before a meeting of the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan that was organized on the sidelines of the ministerial

meeting of the 3+3 platform in Tehran. “The presence of outsiders in the region will not only not solve any problems but will also complicate the situation further,” he stated without elaborating but with an implicit reference to the United States and the European Union.

This emphasis on regional actors being the sole or at least the primary legitimate players in dealing with regional problems in the South Caucasus has been supported by Russia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye. For instance, on 16 September 2023, the Turkish president proposed the establishment of a quadrilateral format composed of the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Türkiye, hinting that local disputes need to be resolved by the countries of the region, not faraway nations.

This approach was also observed in Azerbaijani official statements following the collapse of the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime in Karabakh. Baku started to emphasize the importance of ‘regional solutions to regional problems,’ in reaction, in particular, to France's decision to contribute to the heightened militarization of Armenia: “France's biased actions and militarization policy [...] seriously undermine regional peace and stability in the South Caucasus and

put at risk [the] European Union's overall policy towards the region,” said Hikmet Hajiyev, foreign policy advisor to President Aliyev. The French push played a critical role in Baku's refusal to attend an EU-mediated meeting of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan together with the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz, and the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel, in Granada, Spain, on 5 October 2023 on the margins of the third European Political Community summit. The Azerbaijani Press Agency reported that “Baku does not see the need to discuss the problems of the region with countries far from the region. Baku believes that these issues can be discussed and resolved in a regional framework.”

The revival of the 3+3 Consultative Regional Platform and the rise of the ‘regional solutions by regional actors’ approach in the South Caucasus is taking place in parallel with a perceived decay of the Russia-dominated regional security order. Thus, 3+3 may come to constitute a new regional security order—one that is not dominated by any other extra-regional actor and characterized by local states' stronger agency. In such an order, the interests and concerns of the three surrounding

major powers—namely Russia, Iran, and Türkiye—would be prioritized over those of other major powers that are not from the region. The success of this approach would be critical to prevent a military escalation in the South Caucasus, which is expected by some observers due to the erosion of the Russia-dominated order and the “encroachment” of supra-regional players.

It stands to reason that if a new regional order takes hold and Georgia continues to uphold a balanced approach in its foreign policy, then some breakthrough toward Tbilisi’s participation in the 3+3 format and even an eventual breakthrough in the deadlock over the Georgia-Russia territorial conflict may follow.

This situation would diminish the geopolitical dimension of that conflict, by making it less of a theater in the broader West-Russia rivalry and hence make Russia more interested in engaging sincerely in substantial talks aimed at resolving the conflict. Overall, the geopolitics of the

South Caucasus is passing through a period of transformation within which lies the promise of greater political and economic dividends for the region’s countries themselves—if, that is, they manage to tackle this process successfully and with no hostilities.

Subject, Not Object

The revitalization of 3+3 might well represent a significant development amid the shifting dynamics in the South Caucasus, which is taking place within a global geopolitical and geoeconomic transformation. This platform, initially introduced by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Türkiye after the Second Karabakh

War, faced various challenges to get off the ground, including a two-year hiatus. Iran’s disruptive policies, particularly its opposition to the Zangezur Corridor, also played a crucial role in undermining the initiative. However, recent geopolitical transformations, marked by

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Azerbaijan’s final victory over the separatist regime in Karabakh in September 2023, have reshaped the regional landscape.

The dissolution of the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime in Karabakh can be seen in retrospect to have served as a catalyst for rekindling regional integration efforts. Leaders from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have engaged in historic talks, signaling a potential for peace and stability. Armenia and Azerbaijan successfully held direct (unmediated) top adviser-level talks, resulting in a further exchange of prisoners and opening the way for Azerbaijan to host COP29. Simultaneously, a thaw in Azerbaijan-Iran relations, evident in the launch of various new economic cooperation and infrastructure projects, also contributed to a more conducive environment for regional collaboration.

The second meeting of the 3+3 platform, held at the foreign ministers’ level, indicates a renewed commitment to constructive dialogue and cooperation. The

platform’s potential role in shaping a new security order in the South Caucasus becomes particularly pertinent against the backdrop of the perception of Russia’s declining influence in the region. The conflict over Ukraine altered the region’s geopolitical dynamics, prompting a reevaluation of alliances and strategies by the three South Caucasus countries.

At this time of writing, it seems that the roles of Western (external) actors in actively facilitating (i.e.,

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the EU) and supporting (i.e., the U.S.) the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process are declining. There is a growing emphasis on local actors resolving their issues directly, or at least with the participation of those “closer to home.”

This ‘regional solutions by regional actors’ approach is gaining prominence, with leaders from Russia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye advocating for the prioritization of regional interests. Azerbaijan, in particular, has taken several steps to ensure that it does not slip back into a position of being an object of major power rivalry, working diligently

to secure itself as a subject of regional and, indeed, international order. The potential success of this approach—which is shared by all the countries of the region and its immediate neighbors, as embodied in the 3+3 format—could pave the way for the establishment of a new security order, less dominated by external influences and more reflective of the concerns of the South Caucasus states themselves, rightly understood.

This leads to the following bottom-line assessment: the South Caucasus is at a transformative crossroads, presenting opportunities for political dividends and prosperity if regional countries navigate this process successfully and collaboratively whilst avoiding further hostilities. The future holds promise for a more stable and integrated South Caucasus, provided these positive trends continue to unfold. **BD**

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