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**Fidan Hidayat Valiyeva**  
Khazar University  
master  
fidan.valiyeva@khazar.org

## REGIONAL COOPERATION INITIATIVES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

### Abstract

The scrutiny of regional cooperation initiatives in the South Caucasus indicates that the decades-long and unlawful occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan by Armenia has been one of the main stumbling blocks preventing the success of these projects. In this respect, the outbreak of the Second-Karabakh war did not only change the status quo between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it also provided more effective atmosphere for cooperation by changing the geopolitical realities of this region. One of the first initiatives put forward to this end is 3+3 format which was proposed by President Erdogan.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the opportunities and challenges for the materialization of the 3+3 regional cooperation initiative in the light of the 44-days war and the role this new venture could play in developing conditions conducive for peace, security and prosperity of the region. A case study research method is found to be compatible for the analysis.

The findings shows that 3+3 cooperation project great perspectives for making the South Caucasus more peaceful and prosperous region. It also become evident that while the harmonization of respective parties' interest is a key to success of this process, the lack of peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia and regional security mechanisms undermines the stability and safety.

**Key words:** *cooperation initiative, 3+3 platform, South Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Second Karabakh War, new geopolitical order*

**Fidan Hidayət qızı Vəliyeva**

### İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsindən sonrakı dövrdə Cənubi Qafqazda regional əməkdaşlıq təşəbbüsləri

#### Xülasə

Cənubi Qafqazda regional əməkdaşlıq təşəbbüslərinin tədqiqi onu göstərir ki, Azərbaycanın Dağlıq Qarabağ bölgəsinin onilliklər boyu Ermənistan tərəfindən qeyri-qanuni işğalı bu layihələrin uğuruna mane olan əsas səbəblərdən biri olub. Bu baxımdan İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsinin başlanması təkcə Azərbaycanla Ermənistan arasında status-kvonu deyil, eyni zamanda bu regionun geosiyasi reallıqlarını dəyişdirərək əməkdaşlıq üçün daha səmərəli mühit yaratdı. Bu məqsədlə irəli sürülən ilk təşəbbüslərdən biri də prezident Ərdoğanın təklif etdiyi 3+3 formatıdır.

Bu məqalənin məqsədi 44 günlük müharibə fonunda altıtərəfli regional əməkdaşlıq təşəbbüsünün reallaşması üçün imkanları və maneələri və onun regionda sülh, təhlükəsizlik və rifah üçün əlverişli şəraitin yaradılmasında oynaya biləcəyi rol təhlil etməkdir. Tədqiqat çərçivəsində keys üsulu metodu tətbiq edilir.

Nəticələr göstərir ki, 3+3 əməkdaşlıq layihəsi Cənubi Qafqazı daha dinc və firavan regiona çevirmək üçün böyük perspektivlərə malikdir. Həmçinin aydın olur ki, müvafiq tərəflərin maraqlarının uyğunlaşdırılması bu prosesin uğurunun açarı olsa da, Azərbaycan və Ermənistan arasında sülh sazişinin və regional təhlükəsizlik mexanizmlərinin olmaması sabitlik və təhlükəsizliyə xələl gətirir.

**Açar sözlər:** *əməkdaşlıq təşəbbüsü, 3+3 platforması, Cənubi Qafqaz, Dağlıq Qarabağ, İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsi, yeni geosiyasi nizam*

### Introduction

Throughout history, the South Caucasus has attracted attention as a strategically significant region with its unique position as a corridor between East and West and rich natural (especially energy) resources. However, the stability of the South Caucasus is threatened by the geopolitical realities and

security challenges which also hindered the utilization of the potential that this region holds for economic welfare and social growth. This territory needs an effective platform where the states could find common ground by harmonizing their political interests, settle the existing conflicts through negotiation and create conditions for peaceful coexistence. And now this type of regional collaboration seems more feasible after the end of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh region which was accompanied by the alteration of attitudes and discourses of the conflicting parties in a positive way.

### **South Caucasus as a “broken region”**

The South Caucasus, comprised of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, encompasses relatively small but crucial geostrategic territory between the Caspian and Black Sea, on the south of the Greater Caucasus Mountain range, neighboring the Middle East to the south, Central Asia to the east and Eastern Europe to the west. Despite having sufficient resources for development, the long-standing disputes and clashing interest of important regional actors jeopardize the security and peace of this territory. It did not take long for stakeholders to realize the significance of transnational collaboration since they already witnessed the devastating consequences of the armed disputes and its adverse political, economic and social impacts. However, the history of regional partnership attempts demonstrates that even if many projects have been proposed to foster cooperation in South Caucasus region since the dissolution of Soviet Union, none of them has been successful so far.

The earliest post-independence proposal for regional cooperation was offered by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze in February 1996 which was called "Peaceful Caucasus Initiative". This idea was followed by "The Pact on Security and Cooperation in the South Caucasus" which was first put forth by the President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev at the Istanbul Summit of OSCE in November 1999 and was favored by the President of Turkey Süleyman Demirel. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proposed "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" in August 2008 during the Russian-Georgian conflict. Another project of collaboration, namely "United Caucasus" was advanced by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili during his speech at the UN in September 2010 (Gigiadze et al., 2021:3). While the other regions of the world joined the trend of regionalism and ensure better access to the world economy, the South Caucasus drowned in its troubles. At the result, this war-weary territory was characterized as a "broken", "fragile" or "fragmented" especially in the western literatures (De Waal, 2012:1709); (Boonstra & Delcour, 2015:1).

### **The 3+3 Regional Cooperation Initiative**

On 27th September 2020 the South Caucasus was shaken by the eruption of war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The hostilities ended with the signing of 9-10 November ceasefire agreement by the President İlham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, and the President Vladimir Putin of Russia. The Second Karabakh war was a proud moment of the history of Azerbaijan, but also had wider regional implementation as it altered the geopolitical realities of the South Caucasus and created golden opportunity for the regional cooperation and reconciliation.

The first regional cooperation initiative after the 44 days war was proposed by Turkish President Erdoğan at the press conference following Baku victory parade on 10th December 2020. He elaborated on the tasks regional peace sets before countries and the contributions six-sided platform could make in this respect. 3+3 cooperation format encompasses three states of the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) and three countries of wider region (Turkey, Iran, and Russia). The inclusion of region's three big powers was not a coincidence, because they have had geographical, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and historical links to this region. Prior to this suggestion, there have been several separate groups of partnering states, such as Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran, Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia, Turkey-Iran-Russia, but the objective of the new proposal is to gather all these countries and Armenia under single cooperation framework. The initiative was envisaged to encourage enduring peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus through economic, trade, transport, communication, and infrastructure projects and to counter common threats and challenges. Besides its potential to build foundation for constructive relationships, six country platform could be useful for solving the political contradictions and disputes among member states by building confidence (Huseynov, 2022:69). İlham Aliyev believed that it is possible to eliminate "the future risk of war in the region to zero" by means of new all-inclusive format of unity (1).

When the partnership proposal was made public, Armenia and Georgia displayed uncertainty, while other four states welcomed this idea with enthusiasm. Despite initial hesitance, official Yerevan decided to take place in this partnership negotiations. The first meeting was held on 10th December 2021 in Moscow, Russia. The conference was attended by all the Deputy Foreign Ministers except Georgia. Due to the absence of Georgia from the cooperation talks, the meetings are held on the basis of 2+3 format however the initiative is still referred as 3+3 platform in the official sources. The preparation for second meeting is continuing these days and the session is scheduled to take place by the end of July (9).

The ninth article of the ceasefire agreement signed by the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Russia, and the Prime Minister of Armenia in 10th November 2020 envisaged the restoration of all economic and transport connections in the region (10). Besides restoring the economic ties between Azerbaijan and Armenia, this clause has wider implementation as it envisages the re-opening of Zangazur corridor. Despite constituting small area, this corridor is of great importance due to its geopolitical role as a transit route, thus realization of it benefits all interested states. Considering its genuine potential for encouraging economic cooperation and political reconciliation among South Caucasus states and their immediate neighbors, Zangazur project could be a building stones of the 3+3 cooperation format (8).

3+3 cooperation could bring peace to the South Caucasus as it aims to create and strengthen economic relations among its members. Economic interdependence, in its turn, is believed to be an important element to contribute to peace which is explained with the necessity of protecting commercial contacts. The involvement in dispute, on the other hand, means harming the economic interest of the state. Thus, economic independence, especially trade linkage, contributes to the elimination of the conflicts more than democracy or the alliances do (Gartzke, 2001:394).

#### **Opportunities and Challenges: Is Materialization Possible?**

The emergence of new geopolitical order following the Second-Karabakh war eliminated the main causes of fragmentation, and therefore built opportune atmosphere for inclusive partnership such as six country platform. Azerbaijan restored justice by liberating its territories from Armenian occupation and the motive for isolating Armenia by excluding this country from cooperation projects is now disappeared. Another impediment to the successful integration was the competing interests over the South Caucasus. The zero-sum thinking among external powers had negatively impacted the security of this territory for a long time. However, the three big power, namely Turkey, Russia and Iran has so far managed to engage in the region in constructive manner (Huseynov, 2022: 71).

Even if a new geopolitical reality is conducive for engagement in mutually beneficial relationship and thus the realization of 3+3 cooperation platform, there are still remaining challenges for the regional integration. One of the main hindrance is Georgia's unwillingness to participate. On the other hand, revanchist ideas of Armenian nationalists negatively affects both the peacebuilding process with Azerbaijan and the integration at regional level. The main problem of the South Caucasus region is its security deficit and unfortunately current mechanisms is not working. There is a need to formulate certain action plan which identifies the security goals and the tools to reach them. The security framework should provide ways for conflict resolutions and peacebuilding activities, as well. The truce deal between Azerbaijan and Armenia is not enough and the parties needs to sign a peace agreement to avoid another war and consolidate security and stability between them and in the region. Nobody expects sudden solutions of regions problem and the South Caucasus to be flourishing in a short period of time, however, change toward positive is possible. Once it was impossible to think the region that was scene to most devastating armed confrontations including the first and second World Wars to be one of the most peaceful territory, but today the Europe sets example for integration and development. The EU case is best sample to show what kind of development could be achieved through cooperation (Hammond & Bashirova, 2021: 103).

#### **Conclusion**

The investigation of 3+3 cooperation initiative reveals that it is a promising idea to bring peace and prosperity to the South Caucasus. The economic cooperation is the best policy option for the South Caucasus and has no alternative, in this sense the new initiative could be a good departure point. The fate of South Caucasian countries and the region as a whole depends on the neighboring big powers, so does the successful implementation of any regional cooperation initiative, including a six-party cooperation platform. The research shows that with the shift of the geopolitical order, these actors became more interested to cooperate than collide to secure their national interests. Throughout the

research, it was also become evident that these development should not be taken granted. The end of “no war, no peace” situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia would determine the future of regional cooperation. Even if Azerbaijan officially declared that the dispute is resolved, the absence of peace treaty creates uncertainty regarding this issue. The establishment of security framework which would provide defined policy strategies and their implementation tools for conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes could address the security deficit of the South Caucasus.

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**Rəyçi: s.e.f.d. Vasif Huseynov**

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