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## **CHAPTER 19**

# **TÜRKİYE AND THE 3+3 REGIONAL COOPERATION PLATFORM: EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

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## **TÜRKİYE AND THE 3+3 REGIONAL COOPERATION PLATFORM: EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

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### **Abstract**

The 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform, which includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia together with their neighboring states Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, was established in 2021 with the goal of developing regional dialogue and addressing the complicated challenges that have emerged in the South Caucasus in the post-Cold War period. While the ongoing disputes between the members pose some obstacles to establishing a comprehensive partnership in the region, it is noteworthy that three meetings have already been held within this framework. This article examines Türkiye's role in the 3+3 platform with a particular focus on its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. It argues that the platform, which could be regarded as an informal international organization due to its flexible and non-binding structure, serves as an important instrument for supporting Türkiye's policies toward the South Caucasus. These policies are based on two intertwined principles: the resolution of problems through a "regional ownership" approach, which has also been applied successfully in the Black Sea region since the 1990s, and the maintenance of a geopolitical balance between the West, Russia and Iran. Türkiye's potential contribution to the 3+3 platform can be understood from three perspectives. First, Türkiye's position allows it to serve as a bridge between the 3+3 platform and Georgia, which has so far been reluctant to join the meetings. Second, Türkiye has a long history of acting as a mediator in various regions, including the Balkans and the Middle East, which provides Ankara with valuable diplomatic experience that can be applied to the South Caucasus within the 3+3 framework. Third, as the only NATO member in the platform, Türkiye plays a unique role in mitigating the geopolitical tensions between the West and Russia in the region.

### **Keywords**

*3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform, South Caucasus, Türkiye, Informal International Organizations, Azerbaijan*

## **Introduction**

Serving as a geographical bridge between the European and Asian continents, the South Caucasus has traditionally been regarded as a region of strategic importance in global politics. This is one of the main reasons why the region has become a focal point for intense geopolitical competition between various states and empires throughout history. In order to mitigate this competition, the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform was established in 2021 with the goal of bringing together the three South Caucasus states-Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia-and their three immediate neighbors: Iran, Russia, and Türkiye. The platform aims to promote stability and security in the South Caucasus as well as to strengthen economic development through joint efforts such as facilitating transport corridors and launching infrastructure projects.

The idea for the 3+3 platform was introduced in November 2020 shortly after Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War. During his official visit to Baku to attend the victory celebrations, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan invited all states of the region to form a platform for developing regional cooperation, addressing security concerns and promoting long-term stability in the South Caucasus (Daily Sabah, 2020). The proposal was well-received not only by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, but also by the Iranian and Russian governments, which quickly expressed their support for the establishment of such a platform.

Armenia initially approached Erdoğan's proposal with skepticism due to its strained relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan at the time, while Georgia has been even more hesitant due to its unresolved conflicts with Russia. A major problem for Tbilisi is Russia's recognition of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since 2008 (Dzamukashvili, 2022). Additionally, Russia has consistently opposed the development of closer ties between Georgia and the West. The absence of the EU and U.S. in the 3+3 platform, in this sense, seems to have been another concern for the Georgian leaders, who believe that participation in this initiative may contradict their aspirations for deeper integration with the EU and NATO. This is also why Georgian Foreign Minister proposed an alternative format for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus involving only Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Civil Georgia, 2022).

To date, three meetings have been held within the framework of the 3+3 platform. Armenia participated in all three meetings despite its initial reservations. Georgia has not attended any of the meetings, even though the Georgian flag was displayed at the very first meeting held in December 2021 in Moscow. The following meetings took place in October 2023 in Tehran and October 2024 in Istanbul. The next meeting is expected to be organized in either Yerevan or Baku. While it is uncertain whether Georgia will participate in the upcoming meetings of the platform, some Georgian officials have talked about the possibility of future involvement (Civil Georgia, 2025).

This article examines Türkiye's engagement with the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform in light of the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus after 2020. It argues that the platform, which functions as an informal international organization, provides Ankara with greater flexibility in developing its relations with the South Caucasus. This flexibility is important as Türkiye aims to also manage its traditional geopolitical rivalry with Russia and Iran, which could otherwise become a serious obstacle to the development of Turkish influence in the region.

The article is composed of three main sections. The first section outlines informal international organizations and their advantages in facilitating cooperation between states compared to formal international organizations. The second section elaborates on the key principles that have guided Türkiye's policies in the South Caucasus since the end of the Cold War, while the third section highlights the significance of the 3+3 platform within the broader context of Türkiye's foreign policy objectives in the region.

## Informal International Organizations

Informal international organizations (IIGOs) have attracted increasing academic attention in the last few decades due to their growing role in global governance (Stone, 2013; Roger, 2023). IIGOs can be defined as non-binding flexible platforms that facilitate cooperation among states or non-state actors and therefore operate outside traditional international structures. In this sense, they demonstrate significant differences from formal international organizations (FIGOs), which are usually formed by intergovernmental treaties (Westerwinter et al., 2021).

Both IIGOs and FIGOs provide platforms for dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation on international and/or transnational issues such as trade, security, health, finance, human rights, and environment (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013; Manulak & Snidal, 2021). In addition, both are open to the participation of a diverse range of members including states, international organizations, and non-state actors (Martens & Seitz, 2019; Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2022). At the same time, both can influence decision-making processes and serve as venues for shaping norms, standards, and practices in different fields of governance (Abbott & Snidal, 2000; Squatrito & Sommerer, 2024; Westerwinter et al. 2021).

Despite these similarities, there are a number of factors that distinguish IIGOs from FIGOs. The most significant difference lies in their structure. FIGOs are established through formal treaties or agreements between states, and thus possess legal personality under international law. In contrast, IIGOs are formed without binding agreements and often lack a formalized structure. Secondly, FIGOs establish procedures for decision-making such as special voting mechanisms or formal rules of engagement. IIGOs, however, rely on consensus and informal discussions. Thirdly, FIGOs are held to higher standards of accountability due to their formal nature and legal obligations. IIGOs lack the same level of accountability as their informal nature leads to ambiguity in the roles and responsibilities of their members. Fourthly, FIGOs are more visible in international diplomacy and they are frequently involved in high-level negotiations. IIGOs, on the other hand, usually focus on specific issues or regional concerns. And finally, IIGOs are more adaptable to changing geopolitical dynamics, while FIGOs do not have the same advantage as they must adhere to formal protocols and procedures (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013; Vabulas & Snidal, 2020; Snidal, 2024).

It could also be argued that IIGOs offer significant advantages that increase their effectiveness in reaching solutions compared to FIGOs. One of the main strengths of IIGOs is their flexibility and adaptability, which enables them to respond more quickly to emerging challenges without the rigid structures that define the FIGOs (Manulak & Snidal, 2021). This adaptability is also supported by the ability of the IIGOs to facilitate informal dialogue between members and thus to encourage more open communication that includes sincere discussions (Snidal, 2024; Vabulas & Snidal, 2013).

Another advantage of IIGOs is their decision-making approach, which aims to reach consensus, and therefore leads to decisions that are acceptable to all parties involved (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013; Manulak & Snidal, 2021). This more inclusive method also encourages members to engage in discussions aimed at mutual agreement. In addition, IIGOs focus on specific issues, which is important for starting discussions that address particular regional or thematic problems (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2022). This more concentrated approach can also lead to quicker and more effective problem-solving, as members can streamline their efforts without the broader mandates typically associated with FIGOs.

The reduced bureaucracy of IIGOs also facilitates quicker action, which is important for addressing urgent issues (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013). Furthermore, IIGOs are more open to the participation of non-state actors, which helps bring a wider range of perspectives into the negotiation process (Squatrito & Sommerer, 2024; Rosenau, 2003). IIGOs also serve as platforms for innovation in the sense that they enable states to engage with new ideas and approaches to international cooperation without feeling the pressure of formal commitments (Zürn, 2018). Finally, IIGOs often adopt regional and/or context-specific approaches, reflecting the cultural and political sensitivities of the member states, which increases the effectiveness of the solutions (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2022).

In the last few decades, some notable IIGOs have been established to deal with contemporary issues of global politics. The G20, which comprises 19 countries and the EU, addresses global economic stability, financial regulation, and sustainable development, and its informal nature allows for flexible discussions and decision-making among the major economic powers of the world (Downie, 2022). Founded by Brazil, Russia, India and China (and later expanding to South Africa and other countries), BRICS serves as a platform for collaboration among the rising powers, focusing on their political and economic issues, advocating for reform in global financial institutions and developing cooperation in areas such as trade and investment (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2022). Similarly, APEC is an informal forum for facilitating economic growth, cooperation, trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific region. The Arctic Council, on the other hand, which includes both Arctic and non-Arctic states, shows how informal cooperation can lead to governance in a region that faces significant climate change challenges (Exner-Pirot, 2013). More recent examples of IIGOs include the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) which brings together the U.S., India, Japan and Australia for matters related to the Indo-Pacific region and the AUKUS, which is a trilateral security partnership platform established between the U.S., UK and Australia.

The number of informal issue-based or country-specific platforms has also been rising in the post-Cold War period. The P5+1 platform, including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, for instance, was specifically formed to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran (Sauer, 2019). ASEAN+3 on the other hand was established to develop regional cooperation and promote economic integration, political dialogue and cultural exchange between ASEAN and three Asian powers (China, Japan and South Korea). Some FIGOs have also set up special informal mechanisms to extend cooperation into other regions. NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, for example, acts as a platform to enhance security cooperation and dialogue between the members of the alliance and several Mediterranean countries. Similarly, the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative which was launched in 2008 aims to strengthen the EU's relations with six former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

IIGOs have also played an important role in the South Caucasus since the end of the Cold War. For instance, all three Caucasian states were signatories to the 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty, which was an intergovernmental (and thus formal) treaty on collective self-defense, but in practice functioned throughout the 1990s as a loosely institutionalized and non-binding coordination mechanism like an IIGO. Before its transformation formally into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002, the Tashkent platform served as a venue for post-Soviet states to coordinate military and security issues, although it should be noted that Azerbaijan and Georgia withdrew from the treaty in 1999 and never became members of the CSTO (Katkova, 2022).

As a Turkic state, Azerbaijan has also actively participated in the Turkic summit meetings which have been regularly organized since 1992. Seven more meetings were held between the presidents of the Turkic states until 2009, when this summit mechanism was finally turned into the Turkic Council (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.). Both the summit meetings and the Turkic Council provided an informal platform for strengthening cooperation between the Turkic states in political, economic and cultural spheres. With the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021, this framework was turned into a fully-fledged FIGO with a permanent secretariat and expanding institutional mechanisms (Koçak, 2023).

Another important IIGO including countries from the South Caucasus is the GUAM platform, which later similarly turned into a FIGO under the name Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. GUAM was founded in 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova as an informal platform to address the common security challenges faced by these four countries, particularly the presence of separatist regions backed by Russia. In this regard, GUAM has received strong political support from the U.S., which viewed the platform as a counterbalance to Russian influence in the post-Soviet space (Czerewacz-Filipowicz & Konopelko, 2016). The objectives of GUAM include promoting democracy, developing economic cooperation and strengthening regional security among the member states. For Azerbaijan and Georgia, in particular, this informal platform has provided a significant opportunity to establish new links with the Euro-Atlantic community including the EU and NATO.

## **Türkiye's Approach to the South Caucasus in the Post-Cold War Period**

Following the end of the Cold War, the South Caucasus has assumed growing importance for Türkiye due to its geographic proximity and strategic location between Europe and Asia. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia all became independent states and direct neighbors of Türkiye, which made the South Caucasus one of the three main pillars of Turkish foreign policy-together with the Middle East and the Balkans. It should also be noted that the South Caucasus acts as a corridor linking Türkiye to the Turkic republics of Central Asia, which makes the region even more significant for Ankara's policies with regard to energy pipelines and trade and transportation corridors.

Türkiye's historical links to the South Caucasus date back to the Ottoman era. In 1918, during the final years of World War I, the Ottoman Empire sent the "Army of Islam" under the command of Nuri Pasha to assist Azerbaijan in its struggle for independence (Altstadt, 1992; Swietochowski, 2004). This military support is still remembered as a symbol of solidarity between the two countries. More importantly, the 1921 Treaty of Kars, which was signed between the Turkish Grand National Assembly led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the three South Caucasian republics under Soviet authority, includes provisions that grant Türkiye a form of guarantor status over the autonomy of Nakhchivan and Adjara. The treaty in this regard continues to serve as an important historical reference point in Türkiye's approach to the South Caucasus (Perinçek, 2018).

Historically and culturally, Azerbaijan holds a unique place in Türkiye's foreign policy priorities in the South Caucasus. The close ties between the two countries are defined as "one nation, two states," a phrase which was first introduced by Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev in 1994 during his visit to Ankara (Aliyev, 1994). This special relationship played an important role in Türkiye's decision to become the first country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence-one month before it recognized the other former Soviet republics-which also highlights the special meaning attributed by Turkish policymakers to their relations with Baku (Bölükbaşı, 1997; Ismayilov & Graham, 2016).

Following the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye also became one of the most consistent and vocal supporters of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. In addition to providing strong diplomatic support to Baku on international platforms, Ankara extended military assistance by sending advisors and offering training programs for Azerbaijani soldiers. It also played an active role in the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which has become the main forum for international mediation efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute (Bölükbaşı, 1997).

In August 2010, Turkish-Azerbaijani relations were further elevated with the signing of a "Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement," which includes the pledge that Türkiye will take "all possible measures" in the event of a military attack on Azerbaijan (Republic of Türkiye & Republic of Azerbaijan, 2010). This strategic alignment between the two countries was put into practice during the Second Karabakh War, when Türkiye provided significant military support to Azerbaijan including the deployment of the highly effective Bayraktar TB2 drones. These drones played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's eventual victory over the Armenian forces, which also strengthened Türkiye's image as a key security partner for Baku (Ergun, 2020). In June 2021, the two countries reaffirmed their strategic partnership once again by signing the Shusha Declaration (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

It should be noted, however, that relations between Ankara and Baku extend beyond military ties. Since the end of the Cold War, energy cooperation has become one of the main pillars of the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership, as reflected in Azerbaijan's current role as one of Türkiye's top three natural gas suppliers. Over the past two decades, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have also collaborated on major transnational energy projects that have become crucial for the energy security of Europe (Kardaş, 2014; Ibrahimov, 2015; Ediger & Durmaz, 2016). The inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline in 2006 can be regarded as a turning point, as it enabled Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian Sea to reach global markets via

the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. This was followed by the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipeline in 2007 (also known as the South Caucasus Pipeline), which further deepened the energy cooperation between the two countries. The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which was inaugurated in 2018 as a central component of the EU-sponsored “Southern Gas Corridor”, on the other hand, transports Azerbaijani gas from the Shah Deniz field through Türkiye and onward to Europe, and thus reinforces Türkiye’s strategic role as an “energy hub” in Eurasian geopolitics (Erşen & Çelikpala, 2019).

The energy cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan could not have been so productive without Georgia, which plays a crucial role as a transit country, since the BTC and BTE pipelines pass through Georgian territories. Apart from its geographical importance, Georgia is also regarded by Türkiye as a good neighbor and reliable partner in maintaining stability in the South Caucasus. For this reason, Ankara has consistently reaffirmed its support for Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty over South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Çelikpala, 2010). Türkiye has also become Georgia’s most important trade partner over the years. In the sphere of security, on the other hand, Turkish leaders have provided open support to Georgia’s aspirations for NATO membership (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

The opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway in 2017 added a new dimension to the strategic partnership between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The railway physically links the Caspian region to Eastern Anatolia and creates an important transport route between Asia and Europe. In this regard, it plays a crucial role in the “Middle Corridor” initiative, which aligns closely with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and envisions the creation of a Trans-Caspian East-West trade route connecting China to Europe via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye (Kenderdine & Bucsky, 2021).

Institutional links between Ankara, Baku and Tbilisi have also deepened in the last few years with the establishment of two trilateral consultative mechanisms between their foreign ministers and defense ministers. Both mechanisms were launched in 2012 to provide a platform for regular enhanced consultations between the three countries. The ninth meeting of the foreign ministers and the tenth meeting of the defense ministers were both held in Baku, and reaffirmed the commitment of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to strengthen their strategic partnership (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023). Such developments prove that the relations between the three countries have been evolving from a pragmatic partnership into a more comprehensive cooperation framework including various fields such as energy, trade, security and defense (Köstem, 2019).

Armenia, however, remains absent from all these initiatives, which represents a significant gap in Türkiye’s South Caucasus policies. The lack of diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Armenia has posed an important obstacle to the development of ties between the two neighbors. The Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding Azerbaijani territories was harshly condemned by Turkish officials, leading Ankara to close its land border with Armenia in 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan. Although there have been attempts since then to normalize Turkish-Armenian relations-such as the signing of the Zurich Protocols in 2009 that aimed to establish diplomatic relations and reopen the border between the two countries-these efforts ultimately failed. A major reason for their failure was strong opposition from Baku, which viewed the Turkish-Armenian normalization process as undermining its interests at a time when the Armenian forces continued to occupy almost 20 percent of the Azerbaijani territories (Mikhelidze, 2010).

Apart from the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, deep-rooted historical and political disputes have also hindered progress in Turkish-Armenian relations. One of the most contentious issues is Armenia’s insistence on the international recognition of the events of 1915 as genocide-a definition that is strongly rejected by the Turkish government. This issue continues to cast a shadow over bilateral relations and remains an important source of tension between the two countries. Furthermore, Armenian officials have been reluctant to openly recognize the validity of the 1921 Treaty of Kars, which defines the modern borders between Türkiye and the three South Caucasus states (Armenian Revolutionary Federation Supreme Council of Armenia, 2011).

Ankara views Yerevan's stance on this issue as hostile and uncondusive to the normalization of relations. In addition, the preamble of the Armenian Constitution refers to the Declaration of Independence of 1990, which includes references to "Western Armenia"-a term used to describe what is now Eastern Anatolia-further contributing to Turkish concerns regarding Armenia's territorial claims and intentions.

It should be noted, however, that Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War-and its subsequent full control over Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023-marked a turning point in Turkish-Armenian relations as well. With the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, one of the main obstacles to normalization between Ankara and Yerevan was removed, granting Türkiye greater diplomatic flexibility to re-engage with Armenia. Normalization with Armenia would also strengthen Türkiye's hand in its ongoing diplomatic efforts to advance the Middle Corridor initiative. The Zangezur Corridor-a proposed transport link to connect mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan through Armenia-would provide a direct route linking Türkiye to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, reducing dependence on routes through Iran and Russia (Gafarlı, 2025). This is one of the main reasons behind Ankara's strong support for the ongoing process of finalizing a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Recent geopolitical developments-particularly the repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022-have also created new opportunities for rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan, a process that had already begun in December 2021, when the two governments appointed special envoys for normalization talks. In June 2023, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made a historic visit to Türkiye, and attended President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's inauguration. This was followed by Pashinyan's official working visit to Türkiye two years later, which was a significant step forward in the ongoing normalization process between the two neighbors. The continuation of such high-level contacts indicates that both Ankara and Yerevan are aware of the mutual benefits of developing their relations. Even though there are still a number of difficult problems that need to be resolved, the post-2020 regional environment has created the most favorable conditions in decades for a lasting thaw in Turkish-Armenian relations, which would also contribute to long-term stability in the South Caucasus.

Türkiye's strategic objectives in the South Caucasus are articulated by Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, and reflect a consistent approach that has shaped Turkish foreign policy in the region since the end of the Cold War (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). These objectives include:

- Supporting dialogue for the resolution of regional disputes, with the ultimate goal of achieving lasting peace in the Caucasus,
- Adopting a regional ownership approach, which emphasizes that the countries of the region are capable of solving their problems without the involvement of extra-regional actors,
- Promoting cooperation and friendly relations among the countries in the region,
- Supporting a comprehensive peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia,
- Opening regional transportation corridors and promoting uninterrupted communication.

Türkiye's approach to the South Caucasus is guided by two intertwined strategic principles: resolving regional issues through direct engagement with the neighboring countries, and limiting the influence of extra-regional-particularly Western-powers in the region's political and security affairs. This position is especially interesting when one considers Türkiye's status as a NATO member. However, it should be noted that Ankara's goal is not to exclude the West entirely from the South Caucasus, but rather to promote the principle of "regional ownership," which is based on the belief that the countries of the region are well-equipped to address their own challenges through regional diplomatic mechanisms.

The principle of regional ownership has been a feature of Türkiye's policies toward the Black Sea region since the end of the Cold War. Ankara has employed various diplomatic tools to prevent the Black Sea from becoming a zone of military confrontation between Russia and NATO (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018).

For instance, it has strictly adhered to the provisions of the Montreux Straits Convention of 1936, which grants Türkiye significant control over the passage of naval vessels through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. In addition, Turkish leaders have actively promoted multilateral initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor) to enhance cooperation among the littoral states.

Such efforts have enabled Türkiye to play a mediating role in regional crises in the Black Sea, as exemplified by active Turkish diplomatic efforts during the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. At a time when relations between Russia and the West sharply deteriorated, Türkiye was one of the few countries to be able to maintain dialogue with both sides. This balancing act also provides clues about Ankara's broader regional strategy: to act as a regional power that engages with all relevant actors to promote regional stability, while preserving its strategic autonomy. It could be argued in this regard that in the South Caucasus, Türkiye is applying a similar approach to facilitate the resolution of regional problems (Ismayil & Yılmaz, 2022; Aydın, 2023).

### **From the Caucasus Stability Pact to the 3+3 Platform: Türkiye's Multilateral Vision**

The roots of multilateral regional initiatives in the South Caucasus can be traced back to the early 1990s in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. At a time when the region was swept by ethnic conflicts and civil wars, then-Turkish President Süleyman Demirel came up with the idea of a "Caucasus Stability Pact" in January 2000 during his official visit to Georgia, which aimed to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the regional actors to promote peace and stability in the South Caucasus (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2000).

Demirel's vision was based on a broader multilateral framework also known as the "3+3+2" format, since it sought to bring together the three South Caucasus states-Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia-and their neighbors-Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, but also two influential Western actors: the EU and the U.S. Demirel believed that the inclusion of the West in the initiative would be helpful in attracting their diplomatic and economic support to the maintenance of stability in the region as well as to the conflict resolution efforts (Emerson, Tocci & Celac, 2000). The 3+3+2 model also received endorsement from Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, who publicly supported the initiative during the OSCE summit held in Istanbul in 1999 (Aliyev, 1999).

Despite the efforts of Demirel and Aliyev, the 3+3+2 proposal failed to gain traction mainly due to the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The Azerbaijani government insisted that the main condition for the establishment of any regional cooperation framework in the South Caucasus was the recognition of its territorial integrity, and particularly the liberation of Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenian forces in and around Nagorno-Karabakh (Huseynov, 2021). This fundamental disagreement between the two countries became a critical obstacle to the realization of the 3+3+2 format.

A second diplomatic attempt to establish a regional cooperation mechanism in the South Caucasus came right after the 2008 Georgia-Russia War, which resulted in Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During this period of heightened geopolitical tensions in the region, then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proposed a new framework called the "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform". Unlike Demirel's proposal, Erdoğan's initiative envisioned a narrower group of actors including Türkiye, Russia, and the three South Caucasus states, while excluding the U.S., the EU and Iran (Gültekin Punsmann, 2009).

Although Erdoğan's call received cautious support from Russia and Azerbaijan, it faced significant criticism from U.S. officials, who viewed the exclusion of the West from this platform as being against their strategic interests in the South Caucasus. Tensions between Ankara and Washington were further exacerbated by

Türkiye's refusal to grant passage to large U.S. naval vessels transporting aid to Georgia through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, even though Ankara justified its decision by referring to its international legal obligations under the 1936 Montreux Straits Convention. Additionally, both Georgia and Armenia expressed reservations about Erdoğan's proposal, which undermined the platform's viability and led to its eventual failure (Bigg, 2008).

Twelve years later, the reintroduction of the 3+3 format-this time with the inclusion of Iran-can be regarded as a notable shift in Türkiye's regional approach, which also reflects the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus. Several factors help explain this transformation. First, after 2016, Türkiye's relations with the U.S. and the EU have become increasingly complicated, while trilateral cooperation among Türkiye, Russia, and Iran has significantly developed particularly in the context of the Syrian conflict. Türkiye's experiences with the so-called "Astana process", which is regarded as a relatively successful framework for managing the Syrian crisis with the dialogue between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran, seem to have influenced its approach to Iran's inclusion in the 3+3 platform. By contrast, in 2008, Türkiye's policy toward Iran remained much more closely aligned with the position of the U.S. and Ankara avoided confrontation with Washington which was quite sensitive about Iran's nuclear program (Sinkaya, 2012).

In addition, President Erdoğan has consistently criticized the ineffectiveness of the OSCE Minsk Group in providing a lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute (Hürriyet Daily News, 2020). The group was officially dissolved in late 2025 at the joint request of Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is interesting to note, however, that Erdoğan's criticisms were specifically levelled against France and the U.S., even though they served as the co-chairs of the Minsk Group together with Russia. Erdoğan's restraint from directly accusing Moscow could be regarded as another indication of Ankara's tendency to prioritize the principle of regional ownership (including Russia) while distancing itself from its Western allies in dealing with the problems of the South Caucasus.

As an influential regional actor with close historical, political and economic ties to the South Caucasus, Türkiye is favorably positioned to play an important role within the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform. One of the most significant roles Türkiye can assume is that of a bridge between the platform and Georgia, which is currently the only South Caucasus country that has refused to participate in the 3+3 meetings. Although the Georgian government remains hesitant about joining the platform, Ankara's close diplomatic relations with Tbilisi could provide a useful channel of communication for informing the Georgian government about the decisions taken in the meetings (Civil Georgia, 2023). Türkiye could also use its leverage over Georgia to convince Tbilisi to participate in the 3+3 platform in the short or medium term.

The meetings held within the framework of the 3+3 platform also present Türkiye with an opportunity to engage with Armenia on a multilateral platform, even as bilateral normalization efforts continue between the two countries. The informal meeting held between the Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers on the sidelines of the second 3+3 gathering in Tehran in 2023, for instance, was remarkable as it became an important step forward in the ongoing Turkish-Armenian normalization process (TRT Global, 2023).

Türkiye's successful track record in regional mediation also enables it to play a significant role in the 3+3 platform. Over the past two decades, Ankara has gained valuable diplomatic experience in establishing special meeting formats and/or mechanisms to promote peace and stability in neighboring regions. The trilateral summit meetings held between the governments of Türkiye, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia during the 2009-2013 period were quite influential in demonstrating Ankara's role as a mediator in the Balkans. Türkiye also launched a successful trilateral mechanism with Poland and Romania in 2012 to strengthen regional cooperation in Eastern Europe. In the South Caucasus, meanwhile, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have established similar trilateral mechanisms with countries such as Turkmenistan and Pakistan.

Most importantly, Türkiye's position as the only NATO member in the 3+3 platform enables it to play a constructive role in managing the geopolitical tensions between Russia and NATO not only in the South Caucasus, but also in the greater Black Sea region. Even though Ankara remains committed to its alliance

ties with the West, it has been pursuing a more autonomous policy towards Russia as indicated by its decision not to join the Western sanctions against Moscow after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. Ankara also views Moscow as an important regional partner in the South Caucasus within the framework of its regional ownership approach. Yet, at the same time, Türkiye supports the key decisions of NATO regarding the Black Sea and cooperates with Bulgaria and Romania to provide safe passage of ships carrying grain from Ukraine to the global market. These commitments are also reflected in the final declaration of NATO's Vilnius Summit held in 2023 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023).

At the same time, however, it should be noted that Türkiye's ability to play such roles in the region will largely depend on its capacity to maintain balanced relations with all members of the 3+3 platform. Challenges such as the rift between Russia and the West due to the war in Ukraine, the fragile normalization process between Türkiye and Armenia and Georgia's skepticism toward Russian-led initiatives could easily undermine Ankara's diplomatic efforts to turn the platform into an effective regional mechanism. The most recent diplomatic crisis that escalated between Russia and Azerbaijan in June 2025 indicates how quickly political balances in the South Caucasus can shift (Anadolu Agency, 2025). Moreover, the peace agreement brokered by Donald Trump between Armenia and Azerbaijan in August 2025 is a sign of Washington's renewed interest in the South Caucasus, which raises concern in both Moscow and Tehran. Iran, in particular, has voiced strong opposition to elements of the agreement that would establish a U.S.-linked transport corridor near the Iranian border, warning that such developments could disrupt Tehran's regional connectivity and security interests (The National, 2025). However, if Ankara manages such geopolitical tensions, the 3+3 platform could become a significant component of Türkiye's broader regional strategy.

## **Conclusion**

The political landscape in the South Caucasus continues to be shaped by two conflicting dynamics: a) the unresolved regional conflicts that feed geopolitical rivalry between the major actors, and b) the emerging economic opportunities urging those same actors to reach an understanding to manage their differences. Recent plans surrounding the Zangezur Corridor, including discussions on designating the route as the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP) with long-term development rights allocated to the U.S., further illustrate how economic issues in the South Caucasus are shaped by broader geopolitical competition. In this volatile geopolitical environment, Türkiye's engagement with the region through the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform aims to maintain stability in the region, while balancing Türkiye's own ambitions for greater geopolitical influence with the strategic interests of the other regional actors.

Informal international organizations, such as the 3+3 platform, offer significant flexibility to Türkiye in the South Caucasus in its quest to reconcile geopolitical rivalry with economic cooperation. Unlike formal institutions that require rigid structures and procedures, informal platforms can facilitate dialogue and cooperation between states while allowing for gradual progress in reaching concrete solutions. This flexible framework is also suitable for Türkiye's traditional policies emphasizing regional ownership, which has enabled Ankara to develop multilateral mechanisms that are in line with regional dynamics rather than externally imposed models particularly in the Black Sea region.

Türkiye's approach toward the South Caucasus since the post-Cold War era has been shaped by some important principles. First, Ankara has prioritized developing a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and has provided significant support to Baku's efforts to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Second, it has sought to strengthen economic connectivity in the region through supporting joint infrastructure projects, particularly the oil and natural gas pipelines connecting Türkiye with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Third, Turkish policymakers have aimed to minimize the influence of extra-regional powers like the EU and the U.S. with the goal of promoting the regional ownership principle. Fourth, Ankara has sought to manage a delicate balance between cooperation and competition with its traditional geopolitical rivals Russia and Iran. These principles also demonstrate that Türkiye has been seeking to assert a kind of strategic autonomy

in the South Caucasus especially in the 2000s. Diplomatic engagement, economic interdependence and security partnerships have been the three key pillars of this objective.

The evolution from Demirel's Caucasus Stability Pact to the current 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform also reveals the continuities in Türkiye's multilateral vision regarding the South Caucasus. While early attempts failed due to persistent regional conflicts, recent geopolitical developments such as Azerbaijan's 2020 victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russia-Ukraine war since 2022 have brought new opportunities for cooperation in the region. The inclusion of Iran in the 3+3 platform in particular is important as it represents a departure from previous Western-centric regional frameworks. It also makes the 3+3 format a much more inclusive diplomatic mechanism.

In short, it could be argued that the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform offers a promising-yet challenging-diplomatic instrument for Türkiye to strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus, while contributing to the maintenance of stability and peace in the region. Despite the presence of significant obstacles such as Georgia's reluctance to participate, unresolved territorial disputes, and geopolitical rivalries between the member states, the platform's informal nature and the Turkish-led regional ownership approach could provide opportunities for gradual progress. For Ankara, the success of this platform is important as it would also contribute to the strengthening of Türkiye's image as a key power broker in the greater Black Sea region.

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