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Turkey and the “3+3” Format Prospects



Turkey demonstrating an active foreign policy aimed at raising its status from a regional state to a major power and leader of the Turkic world. Its diplomacy synthesizes several complementary doctrines: “neo-Ottomanism,” “neopanturanism,” “Turkish Eurasianism,” and “Turkish axis.”

Ankara realizes that NATO membership guarantees its strategic safety against external threats from key anti-Western countries. At the same time, the Turkish political elite realizes that the West is particularly reluctant to see Turkey as a member of the European Union and will stretch the time of European integration. Ankara prefers, forcedly or by choice, to maintain a strategic alliance with the Anglo-Saxon leaders, Britain and the United States.

In continental Europe, Turkey still has ambiguous and contradictory relations with France, Greece, Cyprus and partly Germany. For Turkey, the EU is becoming a transit market for goods from Asia (especially energy and other strategic raw materials from the brotherly

Turkic countries of the post-Soviet space), as well as a partner for access to modern industrial technologies and credits.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact bloc led to epochal geopolitical transformations and crisis of the modern system of global and regional security, where the old (bipolar) world order with the supremacy of the USA and the USSR is a thing of the past, and the new (unipolar) world with the US hegemony causes negative reactions of the other centers of power.

The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has deepened Russian-Western conflict contradictions. Iran remains under US and European sanctions, keeping the energy-rich Islamic republic isolated from the solvent EU market. China, despite its soaring economy and overproduction of goods, is at the threshold of stagnation due to systemic contradictions with the US. India, thanks to Western technological and investment support largely against China's rise, is gaining momentum in economic growth.

The world is moving towards the formation of a new world order, which so far has been designated as a multipolar world with different centers of power. Obviously, such a world order cannot be durable and long lasting, for each of the poles will have its own interests and contradict the others. In my opinion, it is best to return to the former bipolar scheme, which had a positive historical experience in the second half of the twentieth century. It proved to be more sustainable in terms of competition and security, defining the rules of the game and bearing responsibility. However, the return to the previous circle of the historical spiral requires time and the formation of a new force in the form of a self-sufficient Russia.

Today, Turkey seeks to take its place in the new system of the world order not just with ambitious claims for leadership in the Turkic pole, but by marking this process as a fact and completing the basic institutions and communications of pan-Turkic integration.

Turkey is betting on recreating some analog of the former Ottoman Empire (neo-Ottomanism) in the eastern direction with reliance on Turan (i.e. neopanturanism – the Turkic countries and geography of the South Caucasus and Central Asia). At the same time, Ankara will face the interests of Russia, Sanaa and China along this way. Nevertheless, Turkey, backed by the United States and Britain, will try to level Russia's geopolitical influence and historical presence in the post-Soviet south, establish leadership over non-Turkic republics (including Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan), and include nuclear-armed non-Turkic Pakistan in the orbit of Turan's common economic market. Hence the content of the doctrine of Turkish Eurasianism as a bridge between Europe and Asia, as well as the essence of the

“Turkish Axis” doctrine, i.e. the leader of the Turkic pole in the world order system with a claim to membership in the UN Security Council. This is described in detail in the [article](#).

These are the contours of the new Turkish strategy, which are reflected in the succinct formula of former Turkish President Turgut Özal: “The 21st century will be the Golden Age of Turks”. Time and the vitality of the geopolitical strategies of the opponents of the Turkish ambitions (Russia, Iran and China) will show what will happen in the near and medium term. In history, it sometimes happens that a particular event and date becomes epochal in the sense of a new development of political and economic processes. The successful outcome of the second Karabakh war in November 2020 and September 2023 for the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem is believed (in Turkey) to be such a turning point. Back in the day, the Persians noted: “Whoever controls Shushi, owns Karabakh. Whoever controls Karabakh owns the Caucasus”. Geography and ethnopolitics have a key impact on geopolitics. Turkey, having ensured the military success of brotherly Azerbaijan in Karabakh, is now seeking to establish control over the 43-kilometer stretch of Armenia’s Zangezur corridor in order to dominate the entire South Caucasus and obtain the shortest exit route to the richest Central Asia (within the limits of historical West Turkestan). More details in the [article](#).

In December 2020, during his visit to Baku, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initiated the creation of a platform of the South Caucasus countries based on the “3+3” formula, i.e. with the participation of six countries of the region – the three key powers of Turkey, Russia, Iran and directly the three Transcaucasian republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia. Ankara’s formal goal was to discuss regional economic and political issues, promote regional stability and security, and develop constructive relations.

Turkey’s present idea was unconditionally supported by Azerbaijan, joined by Russia without alternative, and then joined by Iran. Armenia turned out to be the weakest link on this platform due to its military defeat in Karabakh and the absence of an external military-political ally similar to the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem. In principle, Armenia’s opinion is hardly of interest to anyone among these three leading players, i.e. Turkey, Russia, Iran + Azerbaijan. Yerevan has so far been forced to go with the flow, while expanding the time of the negotiation process to diversify its diplomacy and security, taking into account the visible and invisible contradictions between the participants of this club.

In reality, the “3+3” format has not yet taken place, as Georgia, under pressure from the U.S. and Great Britain, formally did not join the regional platform, arguing its territorial contradictions with Russia over the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2003. In principle, Armenia could have used the same formulation, given the loss of control over

Nagorno-Karabakh in favor of Azerbaijan and Turkey. But Yerevan, unlike Azerbaijan and Georgia, does not yet have an external guarantor for its diplomatic steps. In addition, the current Armenian government “easily” agrees to concessions in search of peace, which surprises not only Armenians, but even the Turks themselves and the other participants of the “3+3” platform.

Therefore, it would be fair to talk about the “3+2” platform. The format itself is only busy with consultations and occasional discussions in just two summits. Although, of course, if any important decisions for the region in terms of economy, politics and security are worked out and adopted on this platform, they will undoubtedly affect the interests of Georgia as well.

As is known, the first summit of the “3+3” (more precisely “3+2”) format was held on December 10, 2021 in Moscow under the co-chairmanship of deputy foreign ministers, that is, a year after the announced initiative in Baku. Subsequently, there was a “3+2” meeting at the level of foreign ministers in October 2023 in Tehran. In principle, all participants of this platform (Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia) and invited Georgia approve of the idea of integration of the South Caucasus, development of a peaceful agenda, constructive cooperation, deblocking transport and transit communications, etc. in words. In reality, over the past three years, the region has not really come close to the pronounced declarations of the “3+3” format; everyone is just putting on a pretty face when the game (or the weather) is bad.

The Armenian academician and Turkologist Ruben Safrastyan claims that Turkey’s initiative to form the “3+3” platform is tactical in nature. It is hard to disagree with this opinion, as the interests and positions of the three important neighbors of the South Caucasus are too different, but none of them (Turkey, Russia and Iran) is in a military alliance with each other. The picture is similar in the South Caucasus subjects themselves, where polar interests and different military-political formal and real courses persist.

In particular, Georgia is an eternal candidate for the EU and NATO; Azerbaijan is formally not a member of any military blocs, but in reality is in a strategic alliance with NATO member Turkey and maintains allied relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) leader Russia; Armenia formally remains a CSTO member, but in reality, after the defeat in Karabakh, is drifting towards other power centers (NATO, USA, France, India, Iran). In such a situation, how can we talk about the strategic nature of the functioning of the “3+3” format, when the security issues of the region’s subjects and their neighbors are too divergent?

Turkey is trying to demonstrate not just active regional diplomacy, but some kind of leadership with pressure on the weak Armenia and a forced partnership with Russia. As is known, the key powers and neighbors of the South Caucasus (Turkey, Russia, Iran) and Azerbaijan today advocate the logic of excluding extra-regional countries from the region's affairs. This is especially often declared by Iran (although Russia and Turkey are not lagging behind) when it comes to Armenia and the Zangezur corridor.

However, in reality, the situation is far from declarations and similar statements. Take Georgia, which is already recognized as an EU candidate and aspires to NATO. How do Turkey and Iran react to this? Moscow gave its answer to Tbilisi in August 2008. Besides, it was through pro-Western Georgia that Turkey and Azerbaijan received the famous oil and gas pipelines with the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad, which were built with the Western money and became Ankara's drive belts to the South Caucasus. Through the same Georgia, Azerbaijan is launching transit of green energy to Europe via the Black Sea.

If Iran and Russia are against extra-regional forces in the South Caucasus, then how can NATO member Turkey be accepted into the region, since its arming of Azerbaijan has already changed the balance of power in the region. Tehran repeatedly accused Baku of military cooperation with the Zionist regime of Tel Aviv, but the supply of Israeli arms to Azerbaijan continues and what has changed from this in the context of the reaction of the neighbors of the South Caucasus on the "3+3" platform?

If such understandable reaction of the region's leading neighbors refers only to Armenia because of Yerevan's policy of dragging France and the United States into the region's affairs, then Iran itself hopes for the Zangezur corridor in order to implement the Indian multimodal transit project along the route India – Persian Gulf – Iran – Armenia – Georgia – Black Sea – Europe. For some reason, the Iranian President I. Raisi had 1.5 hours of telephone conversations with the French President E. Macron. Tehran is well aware that the same continental Europe, which agreed to the US and UK sanctions against Russia, has "shot itself in the foot" and is extremely interested in energy resources (primarily gas) of Iran and Turkmenistan. Baku, which so actively advertises its further gas contracts with Brussels, Belgrade, Rome, Sofia and Tirana, still does not have, unlike Russia, Iran and Turkmenistan, large reserves of the blue fuel to meet Europe's industrial and other needs. And by what road and through what region can such transit to the EU take place, if not through the countries of the South Caucasus?

Turkey argues that extra-regional players should not be allowed into the affairs of the Caucasus, except for the three neighbors. However, where does Ankara plan to deliver transit

goods through the South Caucasus, both through the gas corridor and the middle corridor, if not to Europe? Why then do Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to billions of dollars of EU investment in terms of building a new regional infrastructure (including transportation)?

A similar issue is related to the fate of the Middle Corridor under China's "One Belt, One Road" mega-project. So is China a regional or extra-regional power? So is Turkey in this case "in favor" and Iran "against"? And why would China need such a mess with multiple countries and change from land transit to sea transit and back again, when there is a more reliable and safe communication through Russia alone? The sanctions, you say? But they don't last forever, and Brussels' decision may change due to Beijing's insistence.

As you can see, there are more questions than answers. In this regard, we return to the theme of a multipolar world in which it is difficult to define a single vector due to the presence of contradictions between different centers of power. Here Turkey with Russia and Iran cannot achieve common consolidation of the Transcaucasian agenda and regional integration.

Weak Armenia is becoming one of the targets of periodic strikes. But this cannot last forever, and the fate of the "3+3" format may also depend on the restart of Armenian-Russian strategic relations. Russia will simply establish its control over the same Zangezur corridor, and it will decide to whom and when to open traffic and in what direction – either from East to West, or back, or maybe only from North to South and back.

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