

# REGIONAL SECURITY TRENDS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: AZERBAIJAN-GEORGIA-TURKEY TRILATERAL STRATEGIC COOPERATION

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## Abstract

The following article aims to determine the importance of trilateral Azerbaijan-Georgia Turkey strategic partnership, which includes not only Black Sea and Caspian Sea countries, but also bears a great significance in broader security context.

The subject of this survey is to theoretically and practically explain historical necessity of commencing trilateral cooperation, caused by geostrategic challenges in the region and in the whole world, that particularly became more intense after Cold War and it has been going on for thirty years. In this survey it is presented how the trilateral cooperation began and the stages of development it went through to ultimately result in whole security complex and includes cooperation in transportation, energy and military issues.

The main purpose of the survey is to show trilateral military cooperation, which is a major constituent part in large security theatre and is undoubtedly a regional security cornerstone.

The survey showed that in volatile international system, regional stability and long-term success, either in security or economic field is one of the most important challenges. This is why correctly selecting a political friend bears a huge significance, since today's friend and ally can be on the opposing side tomorrow.

The survey clearly showed that the trilateral cooperation format is an exemplary template for cooperation not only inside the region, but beyond it. Cooperation is based on national interests of each country, with internal and external factors, that do not extradite with common international political architecture, any third party interests or regional and global institutions.

**Keywords:** International system, regional security, geostrategic challenges, national interests, military cooperation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before the establishment of modern international system, the primary mission for state authorities was creating politico-military alliances.

Since the end of Cold War Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey went through a rather interesting path of statehood development. Tough economic, social and political events of the region and the whole world, bloody Balkan Wars, ethnic conflicts of Transcaucasia, severe terrorism created such geopolitical environment, so that countries on the opposing political sides found a common ground for cooperation format that would respond adequately to regional challenges. Trilateral cooperation is the regional cooperation format that is frequently employed by neighboring countries.

According to the national interests, purpose of “Alliance” among three countries is regional peace, security, stability enhancement, economic prosperity and does not go against interests of other countries. The main mission of cooperation among armed forces, is securing communication infrastructure, oil and gas pipeline, railways in critical situations and in case of military escalation.

The purpose of this research is, in its theoretical part, to present alliances and alliance format geostrategic and historical basis, based on theories of two leading theories : **Theory of democratic peace of liberalism and realism, particularly neo-realism**; On the other hand, in practical part, employing qualitative content analysis method to overview trilateral Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey military cooperation format, which, of course, is not a classical, formalized alliance, but includes elements of alliance-inherent strategic cooperation.

This research project responds to following research subject: What geopolitical factors caused the establishment of trilateral format by the countries that once were on the different politico-military sides.

The president of the republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev stated, after 2014 summit: “The major result of 2014 summit is demonstration of our trilateral friendship, which is important for whole region, this should be an example for other countries.”<sup>2</sup>

During any kind of research, it is essential to outline three major factors: a) Interest towards own subject, b) Demand of public opinion - theoretical and practical value of a research and c) Relevance of a subject in a specific geostrategic dimension.

Relevance of a subject is, indeed, increased by the factor of security of energy resources, which exceeds the cooperation platform of three countries and affects regional politics. Trilateral cooperation is a result of a big geopolitical game, played between political west and east.

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<sup>2</sup> Statement of President Ilham Aliyev during summit. Tbilisi, 06.05.2014

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### **Methodological framework of the research**

Methodological framework of this academic paper is qualitative methods of researching, qualitative content analysis, and case-study. Research is based on secondary sources, subject-related materials, meeting proceedings, training plans, political and military authorities' statements, military reports of attaches', treaties were examined and studied, as well as in-depth interviews conducted with high-ranking military service members.

Analysis of literature, expert researches and conducted interview showed clearly, how important it is to maintain friendly cooperation within economic and security scope. Nowadays, we can state that trilateral format is an exemplary regional cooperation model, that provides defence, security enhancement and stability strengthening. Besides this, this format is a unique possibility not only for Georgian Defence Forces, but for relevant organizational units transformation of Ministry of Internal Affairs, that respond to regional security challenges.

### **Theoretical framework**

There are multitude of international relations theories and approaches that explain details of relations among countries, although there is not a unified approach.

For the sake of stability and secure future of Caucasus, it is important to establish a tight social and economic relations. Through a geopolitical viewpoint, trilateral cooperation is bringing strategic goals of countries together, this is a model frequently used to maintain balance of power, also for response to regional and sub-regional challenges.

According to Neo-realist premises and concepts, status-quo power is hard to find in international politics, because countries are always trying to gain power at the expense of others. The main purpose is hegemony. Great countries, always oriented on offense, to increase their survival chance. If we compare theoretical part of this paperwork and main subject of research: trilateral cooperation format, we will clearly see that participant countries, in the light of their challenges and self-aid mechanism, created successful allied cooperation format (Alliance) for the sole purpose – swiftly respond regional security and other challenges. The question of creating alliances is explained by Professor Glenn Herald Snyder of North Carolina University, in his paperwork “Theory of Alliances”. He states, that there is general phenomenon of relations/ aid among countries in the international system, called “Alliance”, which is common interests, desires and anticipations of allied countries to support each other during politico-military and economic crises. Alliances are part of this. Snyder confirms that “Alliances” represent the set of bilateral relations, that they will have politico-military support during the wars or disputes with other countries. He states that “Alliance” is common interests, desires and anticipations of allied countries to support each other during politico-military and economic crises (Snyder 1990, 105).

Adherents of liberal peace theories, first of all, appeal that war among liberal-democratic countries is (will be) a part of history, they develop peaceful political, economic and cultural cooperation, which attracts the rest of the world. World democratic thoughts are mobilized around this idea and radical changes are just matter of time. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, who were on the opposing political and military sides, managed to identify existing political, economic and military challenges and realize, that outlined contours of unified defensive system of the region, quickly established social, economic and political ties. As of today, trilateral format countries aspire to follow international norms and resolve conflicts using negotiations and compromise. It is worth noting, that they support each other's territorial integrity and declare peaceful resolution of conflicts.

According to one of the postulates of liberal theory, all three countries acknowledge importance of states, as well as international organizations in international politics. This emphasizes the significance of mutual attitudes, mainly economic relations. To say differently, from liberal viewpoint, countries harm other countries less, when they are economically dependent on each other.

### **Trilateral military cooperation in the context of regional security**

On the basis of coinciding strategic goals, in June of 2012, in Trabzon, ministers of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey signed an agreement “Trabzon declaration”. The purpose of agreement was to support each others in international organizations. Parties agreed to foster development of relations in trade, energy, transportation, finance and banking, defence<sup>3</sup>.

This cooperation has a potential of success, because it goes along with national interests and is not aimed at any third country.

I would like to emphasize cooperation in defence and security, which is regional security cornerstone. Mechanism of cooperation are high level visits, trilateral training exercises, expert meetings. Cooperation format, like formalized alliances, is less institutionalized, structured and integrated than other international organizations.

The motif of launching of trilateral cooperation was most likely political necessity and major moment to reinstate historical “Silk Road”, providing it's an energy transportation “corridor” security that should enhance resilience of southern Caucasus geopolitics and outline its role in Europe's energy security<sup>4</sup>.

High level visits format is a major political tool of regional cooperation. On May 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2015, In Brussels, during NATO ministerial, minister of defence of Georgia held the very first trilateral meeting with Azerbaijani and Turkish colleagues, where they discussed trilateral cooperation perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> Trabzon Declaration. Trabzon, 12.06.2022

<sup>4</sup> Author interview with Giorgi Kvirikashvili, Tbilisi, 19.08.2022

Parties talked about planning and conducting joint exercises to secure strategic energy infrastructure. It was mentioned, that deepened cooperation would benefit national security of all three countries.

Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey cooperation was established in the light of continued territorial occupation of Georgia and endeavors of bringing whole Caucasus under its influence by Russian Federation. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, on the other hand, desired to develop trade and economic relations based on respect and principle of indivisibility of borders. These aspirations were strengthened by joint transportation and energy project<sup>5</sup>.

Strategic partnership, trust and respect based relations bear utmost importance in common security context. According to theory of alliances, trilateral strategic cooperation main concept is defined by common interests and threats, pushing countries to create alliances, whose members agree to collectively respond to threats and other challenges. Common ideological, cultural and political values and cooperation in defence area created the level of interoperability between army and police units, which allows swift and coordinated response not only on threats of strategic infrastructure, but broader specter of challenges, such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, organized crime.

Trilateral cooperation was created and developed as a joint defence organizations planning and coordination format to secure pipelines, but later range of cooperation expanded and today includes different types of training activities, experience sharing in defence area. Cooperation of three countries undoubtedly increases trust among them and supports regional energy and transportation corridor credibility. For Georgia and Azerbaijan this format is an opportunity to confirm status of reliable partner of Euro-Atlantic community and enhance interoperability with NATO” – Colonel Omar Begoidze, former 1<sup>st</sup> deputy chief of General Staff<sup>6</sup>.

Emplacing strategic pipelines and transportation routes on the territory of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey brought the subject of its security issues. There are important joint exercises, such as Special Operations Forces exercise “Caucasian Eagle” and staff exercise “Eternity”. The latter is an interagency training exercise, which aims refining cooperation in securing strategic pipelines, scenario is based on peacekeeping operations, with an end state to provide security of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline during crises. Common geostrategic challenges generated tight cooperation in security and defence area, which must ensure regional stability and development in future<sup>7</sup>.

In 2015, during the visit to Georgia, minister of defence of Turkey Ismet Ilmaz stated the importance of trilateral military cooperation and efforts to develop cooperation and relations for

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<sup>5</sup> Author interview with Zurab Batiashvili, Tbilisi, 18.08.2022

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with Omar Begoidze, Tbilisi, 27.08.2022

<sup>7</sup> Author interview with Lela Aptsiauri, Tbilisi, 16.08.2022

peaceful future. Trilateral meeting format is a good tool for developing welfare, peace and stability in South Caucasus, which can be achieved only by a tight cooperation<sup>8</sup>.

During 2017 trilateral ministerial, minister of defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov stated, that trilateral format is aimed for regional security and stability, enhancing joint training exercises among armed forces would support development of our countries, regional security and stability<sup>9</sup>.

Regional security, stability and development cooperation format becomes more important nowadays, when “new” world order contours and new geopolitical distribution is shaping. Therefore, trilateral format is a step ahead.

Eventually, implementing joint security enhancement efforts brought up the necessity of giving formality to the trilateral cooperation format. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, “Cooperation memorandum in the defence area among the governments of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Turkey” was signed<sup>10</sup>.

There are some threats regarding the future of trilateral cooperation, although for today, trilateral cooperation platform has a strong political and economic influence on international politics that could even become fully structured. A fine example is November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018, European Commission initiative “In second strategic energy review”, regarding EU energy security and solidarity plan, where Azerbaijan, Turkey, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan were declared as partners<sup>11</sup>.

Speaking of security context, amidst increased threats in region and whole world, cooperation and information exchange between intelligence units becomes the most important. Deputy Chief of defence forces, Brigadier General Irakli Tchitchinadze denotes, that regarding security issues, cooperation is a significant platform for information exchange in security area, also it allows combined involvement for threat identification and prevention. Besides that, format has an economic, energy and political parts that support development and deepening relations among three countries<sup>12</sup>.

Increased geopolitical importance of region affected countries in this region. According to interviews, energy security is a major drive that enables regional cooperation in Southern Caucasus. Geopolitical importance of region, because of huge sources in Caspian Sea basin, became energy corridor between East and West.

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<sup>8</sup> Statement of minister of defence of Turkey, Ismet Ilmaz; 02.04.2015

<sup>9</sup> Statement of minister of defence of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, 23.04.2017

<sup>10</sup> Cooperation memorandum in the defence area, Tbilisi, 31.03.2018

<sup>11</sup> “Second Strategic Energy Review”, Brussels, 13.11.2008

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with Irakli Tchitchinadze, Tbilisi, 24.08.2022

## CONCLUSION

The research confirmed, that energy policy established strategic dependency among trilateral format partners and tightly bound to each other according to countries national security “troubles”.

According to democratic peace theory Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey have no desire and motif to conduct military operations against each other. Three regional neighbors exert their efforts to follow democratic principles, adding equally important positive and cultural values.

According to Neo-realism three countries of trilateral cooperation, upon creation of alliance format, in the view of general configuration of international system, according to increased various challenges and mechanisms of selfaid, agree to create “cooperation” that has a sole purpose – operatively respond to regional economic and security challenges.

From assessing theoretical part, we can say, that trilateral cooperation format is a unique cooperation, alliance and friendship phenomenon, creation of which was dictated by geostrategic situation after Cold War, common national, politico-military and economic interests.

According to common strategic principles of efficiency enhancement, trilateral cooperation format remains one of the primary ally and strategic partner for West, its energy security, prevents maintaining energy monopoly at global stage by Russian Federation.

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