

Geopolitical Changes in the Caucasus and Their Impact on Security in the Region

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Introduction

The resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the de-occupation of the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan changed the geopolitical alignment in the region and opened up new opportunities for developing cooperation between the countries. The tripartite statement of the leaders of Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation and Armenia on November 10, 2020 put an end to the 30-year occupation (as recognized by United Nations Security Council resolutions [822](#), [853](#), [874](#), [884](#)) and provided for the resumption of all regional communications. Whereas previously the conflict caused instability in the region and deterred investment from foreign agents, today the future promises an increase in the pace of economic development and investment in the region. Cooperation in the region, removal of trade barriers, creation of joint ventures, development of the digital economy, transportation, and tourism, as well as the growth of humanitarian interaction, are in the interest of all countries.

The new geopolitical situation in the region can mainly be characterized by two factors: the liberation of Azerbaijani territories after 30 years of occupation, and the rapid expansion of economic opportunities, mainly due to the opening of regional transportation corridors.

Regional Projects Proposed for Implementation in the South Caucasus

Since the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the former Soviet republics, many options have been proposed for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus, [such as](#) “Peaceful Caucasus Initiative” proposed by Eduard Shevardnadze, “Stability Pact for the Caucasus” proposed by Süleyman Demirel back in 2000, “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” proposed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan back in 2008 and “United Caucasus” proposed by Mikheil Saakashvili. Yet, none of these initiatives has actually been acted upon.

After the end of the 44-days war Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, during a conversation with members of the press accompanying him on a visit to Baku in December 2020, said that Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh war was a turning point both in the history of bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey and the region as a whole. In his [speech](#) the President of Turkey declared that “the principle of ‘one nation, two states’ is the main philosophy of our solidarity with Azerbaijan”. The idea of regional cooperation, called "Platform of Six" or "3+3", which involved Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Iran, Georgia and Armenia, was proposed by the President of Turkey on December 10, 2020 during the Victory Parade held in Baku, Azerbaijan. According to Erdoğan regional integration would create a [win-win situation](#) for all participating states and would serve to establish stability in the region. Erdoğan also [added](#), that if Armenia joins the process of building cooperation and takes positive steps in the direction of peacebuilding, then a new page can be opened in the relations between two states. During his speech, Erdoğan stressed that [Ankara stands for peace](#) in the region.

In light of the recent events and difficulties in relations between some of the regional actors, implementation of the initiative was far removed from reality. Nevertheless, building up

relationships between the involved actors, including Armenia, is still important to the governments of the region. To that end, Azerbaijan is already actively cooperating with neighboring countries in the formats Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Iran-Turkey, Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia, etc. Such trilateral and quadripartite connections can develop into a bigger form of cooperation.

Pic 1.



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (L) and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev talk during a joint news conference following their meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan, Dec. 10, 2020

Source: [Daily Sabah](#), Dec 11, 2020

Consequences of the Second Karabakh War and Their Impact on Regional Cooperation

Azerbaijan is continuing to actively develop cooperation with many countries in the region, as trade grows with the Russian Federation accompanying the gradual recovery of the economic cooperation between the two countries from the COVID-19 pandemic. Commenting on the cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, in an interview with the Russian edition of the “National Defense” media agency (Национальная оборона), noted that relations between the countries "[are based on friendship, good neighborliness, mutual support and mutual interests](#)". As for the relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey, it should be noted that on December 10, 2020, a protocol was signed between the heads of state that provides for mutual travel of the citizens between the two countries with only internal passports, demonstrating mutual trust in internal institutions. Furthermore, the heads of state have shown interest in the implementation of more global projects.

Map 1.



Source: [THE 44-DAY KARABAKH WAR: Conclusions and Ramifications](#), Oct, 2021

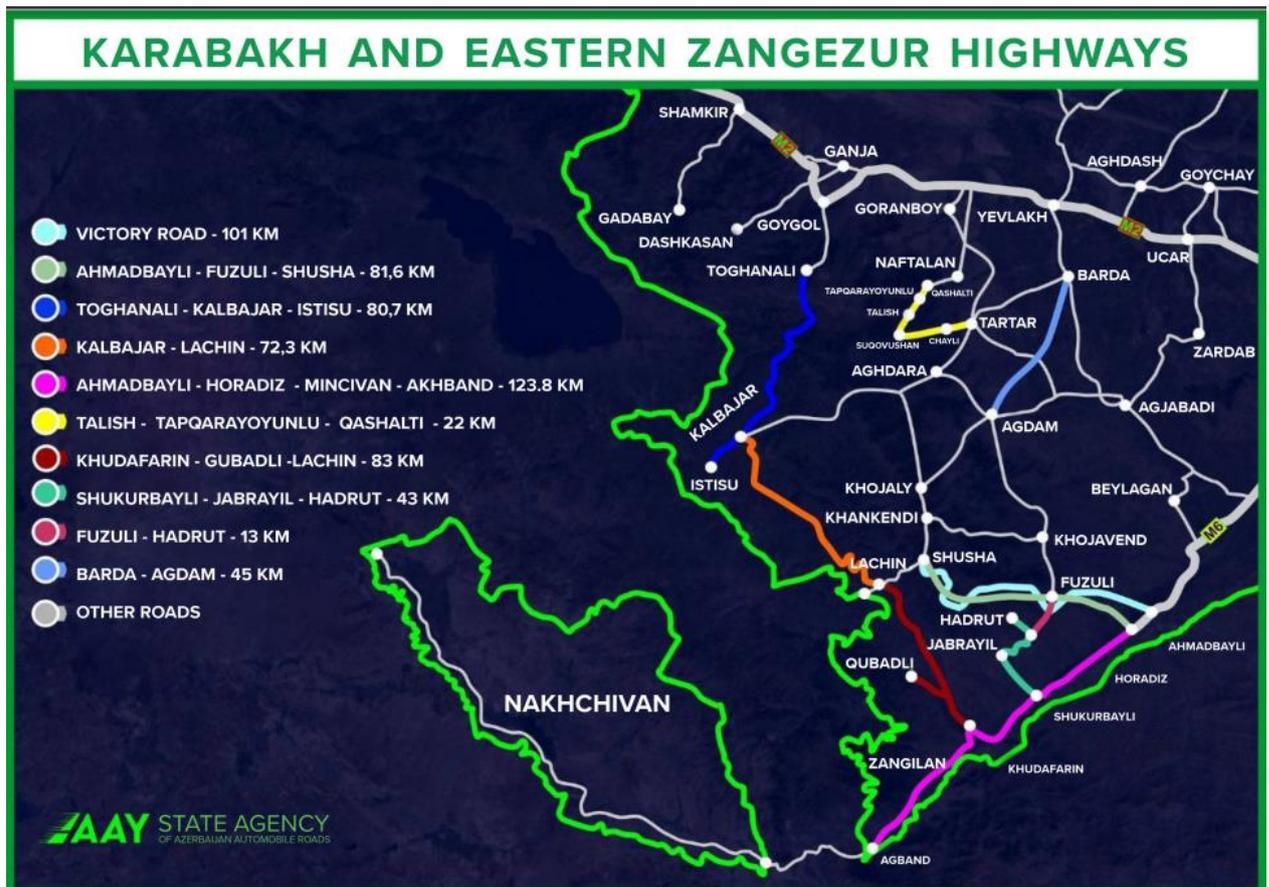
For Armenia, which has been subjected to an economic blockade for many years and 83% of whose borders are closed, joining regional cooperation initiatives and promoting peace in the region is a valuable chance to start partnership and trade with its neighbors. Establishment of relations between Turkey and Armenia has begun with the appointment of special envoys, the former Turkish Ambassador to US, Serdar Kılıç from the Turkish side and the former head of Armenia's parliamentary committee on foreign relations, Ruben Rubinyan from the Armenian side. However, as one of the conditions for joining any regional project with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia would have to recognize the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan. At the moment, both in Armenia and among the representatives of the Armenian diaspora, revanchist sentiments produce a destructive effect on the fragile peace in the region, and every step of the government towards a meeting for the purposes of cooperation with Turkey or Azerbaijan is perceived by the dissidents with particular aggression. This situation has a profoundly negative impact on the economy of the country. The government of Armenia faces a dilemma: to accept the new realities and work towards the restoration and development of the country's economy or to pursue military retaliation, guaranteeing further isolation in the region. So far, the Armenian side [reacted negatively](#) to the conditions imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey, neither recognizing the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan nor ceasing accusations towards Turkey of committing the alleged "Armenian genocide".

Zangezur Corridor as an Important Transport Link within the South Caucasus

In order to start cooperation and interaction between Azerbaijan and Armenia, an agreement must be reached in 4 areas: the conclusion of a peace treaty, border delimitation, opening of transport communications and resolution of humanitarian issues.

Certain commissions were created for the settlement of the first two points, and in July 2022, a [bilateral meeting](#) was held between the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia, where they discussed the implementation of all points of the tripartite statement alongside humanitarian matters, including the fate of missing citizens. Negotiations on unblocking transportation communications between Azerbaijan and Armenia are being held at the level of vice-premiers of the three countries (including Russia). Speaking at the sixth Caspian Summit in Ashgabat, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev [declared](#) that “the Zangezur corridor is already becoming a reality, taking into the account the large-scale reconstruction and restoration of Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur regions, including the development of international transport links carried out by Azerbaijan here”. At a meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister on June 24, 2022, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov noted that Baku and Yerevan have made the most progress on the track of unblocking communications. Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed on a railway corridor to Nakhichevan back in the autumn of last year. At the last [meeting of the vice-premiers](#), they were able to agree on the route of the future road, with the exception of the missing mountainous section of 6 km. The rest of the section will use the old Soviet roads, which until 1992 connected Nakhichevan with the Zangilan region of Azerbaijan through Armenian territory. On June 27, the first trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers and Ministers of Transport of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Kazakhstan were held, where the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that Ankara supports the idea of opening the Zangezur corridor. The ministers of the three countries adopted the [Baku Declaration](#), where they discussed how to use future routes.

Map 3.



Source: [THE 44-DAY KARABAKH WAR: Conclusions and Ramifications](#), Oct, 2021

Despite all of the above-mentioned advancements, there are still many unresolved controversies. At the minimum, the fulfillment of the above-mentioned points is not possible without the recognition by Armenia of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

Cooperation Among Other Actors in the Region

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, speaking at the first plenary session of the Georgian Parliament, elected in the fall of 2020, called for the creation of a new regional format, namely the "Caucasian Peace Platform". The President noted [the importance of Georgia's participation in regional projects](#), while adding that Tbilisi must regain its place as the center of Caucasian identity and Caucasian studies. Additionally, in October 2021, Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani [mentioned](#) that the country should take part in regional cooperation projects at least in some form.

Georgia stands to gain more tangible benefits from political balancing between the South and the West than from an unambiguous rejection of all proposals. In addition, the growing interest of many countries in the operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway for the transportation of goods along the Japan-Russia-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey-Europe route may become a signal for a decision in favor of expanded regional cooperation. At the same time, Georgia is wary of building broad trade and economic ties with Russia, trying to avoid falling into a position of dependence on its northern neighbor and maintain its pro-Western orientation.

The war with Ukraine also affected Russia's position in the region. The end of the Second Karabakh War and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers on the territory of Karabakh at that time strengthened Russia's position in the South Caucasus. However, since the outbreak of hostilities, Russia's military focus has shifted and Russia [was forced to transfer part of its military force](#) from the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia of Georgia to the war with Ukraine. With the current isolation of Russia Georgia can act as a major [transit hub between the East and the West](#), necessitating the strengthening of ties in the field of transportation and energy with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Such regional cooperation is a chance for Tbilisi to regain its place as the center of the Caucasus.

To Iran, the opportunity to receive new investments and access to the Asian markets that comes with joining new regional alliances on equal terms with other countries is undoubtedly in its best interest and thus the Ambassador of Iran to Azerbaijan also supported the [bilateral meeting](#) of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia held on July 16, 2022 in Tbilisi. Iran already has experience of cooperation within the framework of trilateral projects such as "Azerbaijan - Russia - Iran" and "Turkey - Russia - Iran".

Conclusion

In the new world order, regional cooperation is increasingly vital for the prosperity of all involved and in the context of the new geopolitical realities in the Caucasus, cooperation projects would strengthen the entire region. As noted above, Turkey and Azerbaijan are ready to free communications in order to create a clear and sustainable system of cooperation. However, there are still unresolved conflicts between the parties. Despite the fact that the process of building peace in the region commenced with the end of the Karabakh war, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Azerbaijan and Turkey are the driving force behind a positive agenda in the region, aiming to amend the perception of the South Caucasus region in the world as a hotbed of cooperation and development, rather than war and conflict. For all the countries involved, the cooperation within

the region is a definite step towards entering a wider economic market, but in return, participation demands effort and dedication from all parties.

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