

AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA, TURKEY: ADVANCING THE MILITARY DIMENSION OF THE TRILATERAL PARTNERSHIP

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Azad Garibov is a regular contributor to various electronic and printed academic journals and newspapers, including the Eurasia Daily Monitor, The National Interest and the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst. He co-edited and co-authored the book “The Caspian Sea Chess-Board: Geopolitical, Geo-economic and Geo-strategic Analysis”, published jointly by the Baku-based Center for Strategic Studies SAM and the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (Milan, 2014). Mr Garibov is 2016-2019 fellow of the PhD Support Programme “The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System (EUCACIS)”. His areas of interest include political transitions and security issues in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, trans-Eurasian energy and transport corridors as well as Caspian affairs.

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Introduction

The development and consolidation of the energy cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey (AGT) throughout the 1990s and 2000s “marked the beginning of a trilateral cooperation that has since developed into a strategic partnership in various fields between the three countries”.¹ When the first large joint projects, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, were realized and redrew the contours of the geopolitical map of the South Caucasus, conversations about the necessity of cooperation to provide security for these countries started. Later, during the mid-2000s, the implementation of several other regionally important projects reinforced perceptions that these “countries were closely aligned in terms of their foreign, economic and security policies”.² However, as Russia began to flex its muscles in the mid-2000s and after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, difficulties in the foreign and security policies of the three states emerged. Nevertheless, ongoing collaborations and new joint projects have helped not only to sustain, but also to strengthen the trilateral partnership against the backdrop of the challenges this partnership faced. Key current projects among these are the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) to export Shah Deniz II gas to European markets until the beginning of the 2020s. Beyond the energy sector there is also the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project that was commissioned in late 2017.

The trilateral partnership in the political dimension began to be institutionalized at the beginning of the 2010s in the framework of annual meetings of the leaders and foreign

ministers of the participating countries. After fruitful trilateral meetings of the AGT foreign ministers in Turkey (2012), Georgia (2013) and Azerbaijan (2014), the military dimension of this cooperation was launched with meetings of the defence ministers in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan (2014), Tbilisi, Georgia (2015), Gabala, Azerbaijan (2016) and Batumi, Georgia (2017). High-level discussions among the top military / defence officials paved the way to initiation of cooperation in various fields such as military education and joint seminars while the parties also agreed to explore the cooperation opportunities for joint product developments for defence industries, in the area of cyber security etc. The three defence ministers agreed on annual joint military exercises to enhance the combat capacity of their armed forces and develop interoperability capacities.

Whereas initially the cooperation was mainly focused on military preparedness to protect the energy-transport infrastructure in emergency cases, it gradually expanded to encompass other fields. Most recently, on May 23, 2017, the AGT defence ministers held a meeting in Batumi which was followed by the trilateral field exercises “Caucasian Eagle 2017”. The exercise was organized by the three countries’ Special Operations Subdivisions at Georgia’s Vaziani military base.³ The defence ministers discussed the organization of the first meeting of the three countries’ chiefs of staff in fall of 2017 in Georgia. It was also agreed that “Georgia will continue offering courses for the Azerbaijani and Turkish servicemen in the Sachkhere Mountain Training School.”⁴

Armenia, the only South Caucasus state excluded from the partnership due to its ongoing occupation of 20% of the internationally

1 Garibov, A, ‘South Caucasus as a Regional Security Complex: Divergent Identities and Convergent Threat Perceptions’ in Carlo Frappi and Gulshan Pashayeva (eds) *Cooperation in Eurasia: Linking Identity, Security, and Development*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Milan

2 Ibid.

3 “Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey Launch Military Drills Near Tbilisi,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-azerbaijan-turket-military-drills/28529757.html>.

4 “Georgia Hosts Trilateral Defense Ministerial,” *Civil Georgia*, May 23, 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30121>.

recognized territories of Azerbaijan, has voiced “concern over the strengthening trilateral cooperation format between these countries and considers the military dimension of the AGT format as forming a ‘military belt’ around the country.”⁵

This paper examines the key issues in relation to the rationale behind the trilateral Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey defence partnership, its prospects and the obstacles it is facing. It attempts to offer possible further steps in order to utilize the opportunities provided by the trilateral partnership, and will provide strategic insights into development perspectives of the trilateral defence partnership.

The rationale behind the partnership

Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey share many common interests in the trilateral partnership such as the protection of the transport / energy infrastructure, increasing of professionalism of armed forces, and provision of more stability and predictability in the region. The latter is crucial for paving the way for the inflow of foreign investment, particularly in terms of expected mass investment in trans-regional transportation projects. Armed separatism and rising terrorist threats in the proximity of the South Caucasus make it necessary to pool the capabilities of these countries in order to confront potential threats against their security and sovereignty.⁶

Beyond these shared goals, the three countries pursue individual goals in the tripartite partnership that do not have the same priority for all. In fact, individual vulnerabilities along

with common concerns play an important role in pushing the countries towards cooperation despite divergent strategic goals and perceptions of key threats: Turkey sees its key threats in Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terrorism in South-Eastern Anatolia and possible terrorist/extremist spill-over effects because of the Syrian civil war; Azerbaijan is mainly concerned with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia; Georgia wants to balance Russia and achieve de-occupation of its separatist entities. However, these different threat perceptions and circumstances seem not to have undermined, but bolstered the basis for trilateral cooperation.

Turkey’s internal security problems after the failed coup attempt in 2016, Azerbaijan’s security concerns over Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian military support to Armenia and Georgia’s continuous isolation from the Euro-Atlantic community have all made preserving and expanding good relationships in the neighbourhood more important. Similarly, “while current relations towards the traditional regional power Russia sharply vary in Ankara, Baku and Tbilisi, there is nonetheless a genuinely underlying scepticism towards Moscow in all three capitals. Even in Turkey, which has sought to rapidly restore ties with Russia after the 2016 attempt of a coup d’état, lingering suspicions of Russia’s intentions and regional designs sit just below the surface.”⁷

Generally speaking, the security of trans-regional energy and transportation projects could be labelled as a key driver of the trilateral partnership. Particularly Azerbaijan, for whom the energy exports are the key source of revenue and the major source of the country’s geopolitical importance, security of energy infrastructure is of utmost importance. The

5 Ilgar Gurbanov, “Revitalizing the Military Dimension of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Tripartite Partnership,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, July 24, 2017, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13459-revitalizing-the-military-dimension-of-the-azerbaijan-georgia-turkey-tripartite-partnership.html>.

6 Ibid

7 Michael Hikari Cecire, “Georgia-Turkey-Azerbaijan Cooperation: Pragmatism Proves Durable Formula,” *Eurasinet.org*, June 1, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/node/83801>.

proximity of the passage route of the major oil and gas pipelines to the armed conflict zones in Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as terrorist PKK activities in South-Eastern Turkey, where the pipelines pass through, poses serious security risks to the main energy infrastructure in the region. In the last decade, there were at least two terrorist attacks on the pipelines in Turkey by the PKK. Moreover, Russian jets dropped bombs near the BTC pipeline during the 2008 invasion of Georgia. After the "Four-Day war" in August 2016 in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia also openly declared the possibility of attacking pipelines in the case of renewed armed hostilities. The same could also be applied to other transportation projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway which unites all three countries and opens new gates to Europe for Azerbaijan and its Central Asian neighbours.

Although the AGT partnership was initially forged around pipeline and transportation projects, the goals that Baku pursues in the partnership are not limited to these fields. Azerbaijan has long been in competition with its major adversary Armenia and seeks to improve its regional standing as well as to isolate Armenia from regional projects and partnerships as much as possible.

Azerbaijan and Georgia, whose territories host some of the major armed conflicts of the post-Soviet space, are also keen to utilize every possible opportunity to improve their defence capabilities. Although in its current format the trilateral defence partnership can hardly make a serious contribution to military capabilities of Baku or Tbilisi with regard to the magnitude and complexity of armed conflicts they are involved in, it helps Azerbaijan and Georgia to modernize, to improve professionalism, and to combat readiness of their military forces through joint exercises, the sharing of experience and through cooperation in military education.

Turkey supports the development of Azerbaijan's and Georgia's military capabilities by fostering

their defence cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mainly within the Partnership for Peace framework. Furthermore, Turkey invests in the training of the two countries' armed forces. Ankara also "enables Azerbaijan to participate in NATO's military missions abroad under the Turkish flag," which is a valuable experience for the Azerbaijani armed forces.⁸ Particularly Georgia, which has chosen a strategy of integration with Euro-Atlantic structures and wishes to eventually join the North Atlantic Alliance, views the defence partnership with the NATO-member Turkey as an important means to upgrade its military forces to NATO standards. Both the AGT format and Azerbaijan's bilateral military ties with Turkey and Georgia enable Baku to diversify sources of its military supplies which have recently turned into a significant issue in the defence strategy of Baku.

No common document adopted within the framework of the trilateral partnership mentions that the joint defence partnership can also be directed, in the sense of a military commitment, at the restoration of the territorial integrity of the participant countries. However, this issue remains at the core of the foreign and security policies of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Both countries expect, even though indirectly, certain benefits from the trilateral cooperation in this respect. First of all, it is very important for Baku and Tbilisi to obtain open support for its territorial integrity from all possible international platforms, including the AGT partnership. Thus, every meeting of officials such as presidents and foreign or defence ministers produces political statements about unconditional support for

8 Ilgar Gurbanov, "Revitalizing the Military Dimension of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Tripartite Partnership," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, July 24, 2017, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13459-revitalizing-the-military-dimension-of-the-azerbaijan-georgia-turkey-tripartite-partnership.html>.

the territorial integrity of the participants. It is no surprise that in the 2017 Batumi meeting, “the ministers clearly expressed [their] position regarding the protection of the principle of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia,” and declared that “the policy of non-recognition of the occupied territories will be firmly supported in the international formats in the future as well.⁹ However, beyond such declarative statements, the parties refrain from making military commitments within the AGT format towards the restoration of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan or Georgia.

As a region with growing aspirations, the South Caucasus is important for Turkey due to its strategic location and resources. Having an unclear relationship with Western European states—towards which Turkey has been oriented for the last 150 years—Ankara is pondering its prospects as a regional power. As such, it needs to exert a certain amount of influence in the neighbouring regions including the South Caucasus and Central Asia. For Ankara, the South Caucasus is also a gate to the energy richness of the Caspian Sea—another important region for Turkey. Therefore, Turkey seeks to increase its influence in the South Caucasus, which has so far been done through bilateral relationships with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Specifically, Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 showed the impotence of Turkey in terms of security dynamics in the South Caucasus. Therefore, Turkey is interested in strengthening its foothold in the security realm in the region, and the trilateral defence partnership promises to be a good instrument for this.

Obstacles to the trilateral cooperation

Along with strong incentives for the trilateral defence partnership, there are also certain

challenges which need to be addressed if the three countries want to further advance the partnership.

The first and the most important challenge is surely Russia’s domination over the security dynamics in the South Caucasus. The partner countries are incapable of taking any meaningful measures to counter Moscow’s overwhelming influence on the region’s security as can be seen in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The strongest party in the trilateral partnership, Turkey, surely wants to increase its role in the regional security architecture. However, understanding its weakness vis-à-vis Russia, it tries not to irritate Moscow by seeming too ambitious in the South Caucasus. Turkey needs Russia’s cooperation on many other issues and in other parts of the world, most importantly in Syria. Thus, Turkey is careful to not push the partnership with South Caucasus countries too fast, and is avoiding moves that could depict the partnership as an emerging and rivalling alliance in Russia’s “near abroad.”

While Georgia perceives Russia as the major security threat and seeks regional defence partnership to partly balance it, Azerbaijan shares Turkish concerns regarding Moscow. At the same time, Georgia is apprehensive of Armenia’s concerns regarding the trilateral defence partnership and repeatedly conveys the message that the partnership is on no account an anti-Armenian alliance.¹⁰

Prospects

Despite the changes in the domestic politics of all three countries and despite the external pressures and partially diverging interests in the relations with their neighbours, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey have managed to preserve

9 “Georgia Hosts Trilateral Defense Ministerial,” *Civil Georgia*, May 23, 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30121>.

10 “Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan announce joint military drills,” *Agenda.de*, May 16, 2016, <http://agenda.ge/news/58017/eng>.

the pragmatic spirit of this cooperation. It can be seen that the trilateral partnership is of intrinsic interest to the participant countries and is not contingent upon the elites presently in power in the three states. However, several important steps have to be taken in order to further advance the trilateral defence partnership.

First, better coordination should be pursued and the institutional framework should be improved. Although the cooperation is still young, the three countries should actively seek formal institutionalization of the partnership beyond the occasional meetings of the ministers of defence and the organization of joint military exercises. It is clear that the three states tend to avoid the label of “alliance” and do not want to be overambitious in order not to irritate their neighbours and other partners (particularly Russia and Armenia). However, cooperation without the establishment of permanent institutional bodies has certain limitations and might possibly never go beyond the current form of consultations, political statements, and the conduct of joint military exercises.

Second, one of the most promising fields in the trilateral military partnership is cooperation among the defence industries of the participating states. All of them have ambitious plans for developing the defence industry production and have already achieved certain successes. Particularly, Turkey has recently been turning into a significant defence manufacturer and exporter, whose arms exports reached 1.68 billion USD in 2016. Azerbaijan and Georgia—catching up in this field—might benefit from a partnership with Turkey in this regard. It is also no secret that the establishment of a high-quality and competitive defence industry is a very costly and time-consuming task, particularly for small countries. From this perspective, it is important for Georgia and Azerbaijan that Turkey helps

them share the burden of the development of new defence products and overcome the disadvantage of having small domestic markets for defence equipment. The three countries have already established a working group to investigate the opportunities for cooperation on the production of defence-related products, and this direction of the partnership should be explored more.

Third, there is a need for the arrangement of regular, more frequent trilateral military exercises with the participation of a larger number of troops. This could be very beneficial in terms of equipping the armed forces of the partner countries with interoperability capabilities.

Fourth, pipeline security will be a major challenge in the near future. There is no plan for a trilateral response to third-party attacks on the oil and gas pipelines. Attacks (by PKK) and threats of attacks (by Russia and Armenia) against the energy infrastructure have already revealed the vulnerabilities of the pipelines and the tangibility of third-party attacks on them. Thus, pipeline security should be seriously reviewed, better coordinated and intelligence sharing on this issue should be strengthened among the relevant agencies.

Finally, the development of information technologies and increasing reliance on them within domestic industries creates the risk of disruptions in the operation of pipelines or railways in the case of cyberattacks. In this regard, cooperation in the field of cyber defence, particularly for the protection of pipelines and other transportation projects, should be an important focus for the three countries.

To conclude, while a strong foundation has been created for the tripartite AGT defence partnership, there is still a long way to go to develop it into a solid organization with strong commitments by the participating states.

This path of development, which should include an expansion and a deepening of cooperation with particular emphasis on institutionalization, is not free from obstacles. These stem from divergences among the three countries and from the opposition of other regional actors. However, the recognition of these obstacles can enhance overall regional stability and generate significant contributions to the security of these countries. Enhancing regional security and stability through the trilateral framework—which is a partnership with objectives for peace and stability, but not for war—will also be advantageous for neighbouring regions such as Central Asia and Europe as they can benefit in terms of trade and connectivity.

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