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TÜRKİYE AND THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS. GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND COOPERATION

Doctor of Philosophy in History Ismayilova Elmira Cavanshir
Azerbaijan University
elmiraismayil@gmail.com

Abstract: *Türkiye and the South Caucasus region have a long history of interactions that span centuries. Located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the South Caucasus has always been a center of geopolitical interest and strategic activity. With its rich cultural diversity, rugged landscapes, and complex history, the South Caucasus is of great importance to Türkiye, influencing its foreign policy and regional goals. This article explores the various aspects of Türkiye's strategic involvement with the South Caucasus, examining the historical connections, geostrategic needs, economic partnerships, and political challenges that define this crucial relationship.*

Keywords: Türkiye, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus, cooperation, geopolitical interest

Ключевые слова: Турция, Азербайджан, Южный Кавказ, сотрудничество, геополитический интерес

Açar sözlər: Türkiyə, Azərbaycan, Cənubi Qafqaz, əməkdaşlıq, geosiyasi maraq

Central to Türkiye's strategic thinking is the geostrategic significance of the South Caucasus, which acts as a vital link between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The region is an essential corridor for energy transit, enabling the flow of oil and natural gas from the resource-rich Caspian Sea area to global markets. Türkiye, positioned at the intersection of East and West, has become a key player in tapping into the region's energy resources. It has positioned itself as a critical transit hub, connecting suppliers in the Caspian region with consumers in Europe.

Türkiye's involvement in the South Caucasus is shaped by a mix of historical influences, strategic needs, economic goals, and political ambitions. As the region continues to change in response to evolving geopolitical circumstances, Türkiye's role as a regional influencer and strategic ally will be crucial in determining the future developments in the South Caucasus and beyond.

Türkiye's Southern Caucasus policy is emphasizes enhancing regional cooperation, political stability, and economic development. Türkiye maintains deep-rooted historical, cultural, and economic ties with these nations, and the Southern Caucasus region acts as a strategic bridge, linking Türkiye with Central Asia. These relationships are not only significant in terms of geopolitical positioning but also serve as a platform for regional collaboration and mutual benefits.

After the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Türkiye was among the first countries to officially recognize the independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Over the years, Türkiye has cultivated particularly strong relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia, with both nations becoming key partners in various fields, including trade, security, and energy. However, Turkish-Armenian relations have faced significant challenges, primarily due to Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan [8]. In 1993, the Republic of Türkiye closed its borders with Armenia due to the latter's occupation of Azerbaijani territories around Nagorno-Karabakh. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored after a certain period, with some concessions. In 1994-1995, air links were established between Istanbul and Yerevan. Despite numerous attempts by

Armenia, no political relations were established. The reason was the conditions set by Türkiye: Armenia was to withdraw from the occupied Azerbaijani territories and renounce the false “genocide” claims. However, the Armenians did not fulfil these conditions: Armenia neither withdrew from the occupied territories nor gave up its false claims [1].

To normalize relations, Türkiye and Armenia initiated several diplomatic efforts. As part of this process, the Zurich Protocols were signed in 2009 following negotiations that began in 2008. While Türkiye submitted the Protocols to the Grand National Assembly for approval, Armenia referred them to its Constitutional Court for a constitutional review. The court deemed the Protocols compatible with Armenia’s Constitution, but, on April 23, 2010, Armenia notified Türkiye via a diplomatic note to its embassy in Tbilisi that it had suspended the ratification process. Later, in February 2015, then-President Serzh Sargsyan formally withdrew the Protocols from the Armenian Parliament and declared them null and void on March 1, 2018 [3].

In the years following the independence of these three countries, Türkiye’s relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia have significantly strengthened. Both countries have become important strategic partners for Türkiye, and the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC) mechanisms were established to further promote political and economic collaboration. These regular high-level visits and ongoing diplomatic dialogues underscore the growing political, economic, and security cooperation between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Moreover, Türkiye has played a crucial role in fostering trilateral and quadrilateral cooperation mechanisms, particularly with Azerbaijan, involving other regional stakeholders as well.

Türkiye’s efforts in the Southern Caucasus are also reflected in large-scale infrastructure and energy projects aimed at enhancing regional prosperity and stability. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Crude Oil Pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Natural Gas Pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway have become operational, facilitating the transportation of energy and goods between the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe. Additionally, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) has significantly boosted Türkiye’s role as a key energy hub in the region. These infrastructure projects, supported by Türkiye, are essential for the economic development of the Southern Caucasus and serve as important tools for regional cooperation.

Amid the worsening of Russian-Georgian relations throughout the post-Soviet era, reaching its peak in the August 2008 conflict over South Ossetia, Georgia’s primary economic and political partners turned out to be Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Over the years, Georgian-Turkish relations have intensified, covering various sectors, including trade, energy, and infrastructure. A notable moment came in 2002, when the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline’s construction was officially launched in Baku. This pipeline, a major energy project, is considered a cornerstone of regional cooperation, connecting Azerbaijan’s oil fields to Türkiye’s Mediterranean coast.

In July 2006, the BTC pipeline was officially inaugurated in Ceyhan, marking a key moment in the energy cooperation between the three countries. The trade relations between Türkiye and Georgia further deepened with the signing of free trade agreements in 2007, which also addressed crucial issues like avoiding double taxation [4].

Energy projects in the South Caucasus did not conclude with the BTC pipeline; rather, they laid the groundwork for further initiatives, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, TANAP, and TAP. The Southern Gas Corridor was established to expand the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum route, facilitate the construction of the TANAP pipeline across Türkiye, and

advance the TAP pipeline into Europe. The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, also known as the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline, was commissioned in 2007, facilitating the export of natural gas from the first phase of the Shah Deniz project to Georgia, Türkiye, and Greece. In 2012, Azerbaijan and Türkiye signed an agreement for the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), initiated by Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev and then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The following year, in 2013, the Shah Deniz consortium selected the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) to transport Azerbaijani gas from Türkiye's border to southern Italy. These developments have made it possible to realize the Southern Gas Corridor, effectively linking the Shah Deniz gas field to European markets via southern Italy [2]. Initially proposed by the European Commission in 2008, the Southern Gas Corridor aims to create a strategic supply route for natural gas from the Caspian and Middle Eastern regions to Europe.

On May 6, 2014, the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan Trilateral Summit was held in Tbilisi, attended by Turkish President Abdullah Gül, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, and Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili. In his opening remarks, President Gül emphasized the strong and multifaceted cooperation among the three countries, highlighting major regional projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Gas Pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway. He noted that these projects significantly contribute to the stability and prosperity of the South Caucasus. The summit focused on enhancing trilateral cooperation and exploring new opportunities for regional development [7].

Following the favorable political environment created after the Second Karabakh War, a new initiative was launched to facilitate the gradual normalization of relations between Türkiye and Armenia through direct dialogue.

Through a series of meetings between the Special Representatives, progress was made, leading to the resumption of direct flights on February 2, 2022. Additionally, it was agreed to open the Türkiye-Armenia border to third-country citizens and to initiate air cargo trade between the two countries starting from July 1, 2022.

Türkiye has established strong diplomatic relationships with Azerbaijan and Georgia, engaging in trilateral summits to address issues related to regional security, economic collaboration, and strategic initiatives [6]. Türkiye works closely with Azerbaijan and Georgia on military training programs, joint exercises, and defense agreements, all of which play a vital role in enhancing regional security and stability. This trilateral cooperation framework not only improves border security but also bolsters military capabilities in response to potential regional threats. "Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia share a strong and productive military partnership, reflecting their dedication to promoting peace, stability, and security not only within the region but also on a global scale", stated Turkish Deputy Minister of National Defence Yunus Emre Karaosmanoglu during a conference on international defense and security in Batumi [5].

Additionally, Türkiye fosters cultural diplomacy through educational programs, scholarships, and cultural initiatives designed to strengthen historical and linguistic connections with nations in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion

Türkiye's collaboration with the South Caucasus encompasses various sectors, with energy, trade, security, and diplomacy serving as the foundation of their relations. The strategic partnership, especially with Azerbaijan and Georgia, is fueled by mutual economic interests, geopolitical factors, and cultural connections. These joint efforts have not only promoted regional stability but have also established Türkiye as a vital link between Europe

and the South Caucasus. Looking ahead, ongoing cooperation in infrastructure development, energy diversification, and security partnerships will be essential for sustaining and enhancing these relationships.

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TÜRKİYƏ VƏ CƏNUBİ QAFQAZ. GEOSİYASİ DİNAMİKA VƏ ƏMƏKDAŞLIQ

İsmayilova Elmira Cavanşir qızı
Xülasə

Türkiyə və Cənubi Qafqaz regionu əsrlərlə davam edən uzunmüddətli qarşılıqlı əlaqələrə malikdir. Avropa, Asiya və Orta Şərqi kəsişməsində yerləşən Cənubi Qafqaz həmişə geosiyasi maraqların və strateji fəaliyyətin mərkəzi olmuşdur. Zəngin mədəni müxtəlifliyi, çətin relyefi və mürəkkəb tarixi ilə Cənubi Qafqaz Türkiyə üçün böyük əhəmiyyət kəsb edir və onun xarici siyasətini və regional hədəflərini formalaşdırır. Bu məqalə Türkiyənin Cənubi Qafqazla strateji əməkdaşlığının müxtəlif aspektlərini araşdıraraq, tarixi əlaqələr, geostrateji ehtiyaclar, iqtisadi tərəfdaşlıqlar və bu vacib münasibətləri müəyyən edən siyasi çətinliklərə nəzər salır.

**ТУРЦИЯ И ЮЖНЫЙ КАВКАЗ. ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ДИНАМИКА И
СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО***Исмаилова Эльмира Джаванишировна**Резюме*

Турция и регион Южного Кавказа имеют многовековую историю взаимодействий. Расположенный на пересечении Европы, Азии и Ближнего Востока, Южный Кавказ всегда был центром геополитических интересов и стратегической активности. Обладая богатым культурным разнообразием, сложным рельефом и непростой историей, Южный Кавказ имеет большое значение для Турции, влияя на её внешнюю политику и региональные цели. В данной статье рассматриваются различные аспекты стратегического взаимодействия Турции с Южным Кавказом, включая исторические связи, геостратегические потребности, экономическое партнерство и политические вызовы, определяющие эти отношения.

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