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AZERBAIJAN-TURKEY-GEORGIA TRILATERAL COOPERATION AS A FACTOR OF REGIONAL STABILITY (VIEW FROM AZERBAIJAN)

Annotation

One of the main conditions for political stability and economic development in the Caucasus is to ensure regional stability. In addition to the South Caucasus, the trio covers the strategic region connecting the Caspian-Black-Mediterranean basins. The formation of the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia triangle is based on historical and cultural ties, geographical proximity, being part of a single transit corridor, favorable conditions for joint economic cooperation and political will.

After the collapse of the USSR, the establishment of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral cooperation began over economic interests. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines and the Southern Gas Corridor are the main pillars of this trilateral cooperation. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project is one of the factors contributing to regional stability and development, playing the role of a strategic link in the creation of a transport corridor between Asia and Europe.

Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey business forums organized in trilateral format, action plans on sectoral cooperation are another indicator of regional strategic partnership between the countries, as well as a provider of development in tourism, energy, agriculture, environmental protection, humanitarian and sports.

The Trabzon Declaration, the Batumi Joint Communiqué, the Ganja, Kars, Tbilisi and Baku Declarations are of great importance in terms of political dialogue and the implementation of special trilateral projects. The importance of the agreement reached during the Trabzon summit of the heads of state of the three countries in the context of resolving the existing regional conflicts in the region and resolutely combating terrorism and organized crime should be emphasized. There is also successful cooperation in the field of defense.

Given all this, Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation should be assessed as a factor of regional stability and the largest guarantor of lasting peace and progress in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, cooperation, stability, development

AZƏRBAYCAN-TÜRKİYƏ-GÜRCÜSTAN ÜÇTƏRƏFLİ ƏMƏKDAŞLIĞI REGIONAL SABİTLİK AMİLİ KİMİ (AZƏRBAYCANDAN BAXIŞ)

Annotasiya

Qafqaz ölkələrində siyasi sabitliyin və iqtisadi inkişafın əsas şərtlərindən biri regional sabitliyin təmin edilməsidir. Olduqca uğurlu Azərbaycan-Türkiyə-Gürcüstan üçtərəfli formatı regionda sabitliyi, təhlükəsizliyi və mütəmadi inkişafı təmin edir. Bu üçlük Cənubi Qafqazdan əlavə Xəzər-Qara-Aralıq dənizi hövzələrini birləşdirən strateji bölgəni də əhatə edir. Azərbaycan-Türkiyə-Gürcüstan üçbucağının formalaşmasının əsasında tarixi və mədəni əlaqələr, coğrafi

qonşuluq, vahid tranzit dəhlizinin tərkib hissələri olmaq, birgə iqtisadi əməkdaşlıq üçün əlverişli şərait və siyasi iradə dayanır.

SSRİ-nin süqutundan sonra Azərbaycan-Gürcüstan-Türkiyə üçtərəfli əməkdaşlığın yaranması iqtisadi maraqlar üzərindən başlayıb. Bakı-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Bakı-Tbilisi-Ərzurum boru kəmərləri, Cənub Qaz Dəhlizi bu üçtərəfli əməkdaşlığın əsas dayaqlarıdır. Bakı-Tbilisi-Qars dəmiryolu layihəsi Asiya və Avropa arasında nəqliyyat dəhlizinin yaradılması istiqamətində strateji həlqə rolunu oynamaqla regional sabitliyə və inkişafa töhfə verən amillərdən biridir.

Üçtərəfli formatda təşkil olunan Azərbaycan-Gürcüstan-Türkiyə biznes forumları, sahəvi əməkdaşlıq üzrə fəaliyyət planları ölkələr arasında regional strateji tərəfdaşlığın daha bir göstəricisi, eyni zamanda turizm, enerji, kənd təsərrüfatı, ətraf mühitin mühafizəsi, humanitar və idman sahələrində inkişafın təminatçısıdır.

Siyasi dialoq və xüsusi üçtərəfli layihələrin yerinə yetirilməsi baxımından Trabzon Bəyannaməsi, Batumi Birgə Komünikesi, Gəncə, Qars, Tbilisi və Bakı Bəyanatlarının əhəmiyyəti olduqca böyükdür. Regionda mövcud regional münaqişələrin həll edilməsi, terrorizmə və mütəşəkkil cinayətkarlığa qarşı qətiyyətlə mübarizə aparılması çərçivəsində üç ölkənin dövlət başçılarının Trabzon zirvə görüşü əsnasında izalanmış sazişin əhəmiyyəti xüsusi vurğulanmalıdır. Müdafiə sahəsində də uğurlu əməkdaşlıq mövcuddur.

Bütün bunlar nəzərə alınaraq, Azərbaycan-Türkiyə-Gürcüstan üçtərəfli əməkdaşlığı regional sabitlik amili kimi – Cənubi Qafqazda davamlı sülhün və tərəqqinin ən böyük təminatçısı kimi qiymətləndirilməlidir.

Açar sözlər: Azərbaycan, Gürcüstan, Türkiyə, əməkdaşlıq, sabitlik, inkişaf

Introduction

One of the main conditions for political stability and economic development in the South Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, is to ensure regional stability. In this regard, the establishment of mutually beneficial cooperation with the countries of the region has been identified as one of the main directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Azerbaijan has managed to establish such relations with Turkey and Georgia. Azerbaijan-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Georgia bilateral relations are at the level of strategic partnership. At the same time, there is a very successful Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral format. Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia cooperation ensures stability, security, and sustainable development in the region. In addition to the South Caucasus, the trio covers the strategic region connecting the Caspian-Black Sea-Mediterranean basins. The formation of the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia triangle is based on geographical proximity, historical and cultural ties, favorable conditions for joint economic cooperation, being part of a single transit corridor, and political will.

Political cooperation

Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation was possible, first of all, due to the strong political will of the heads of state. Although positive steps were taken to establish cooperation with foreign countries in the early days of the restoration of state independence, the high stage of development of this field coincides with the period after the election of Heydar Aliyev as President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Heydar

Aliyev's contribution to the development and strengthening of Azerbaijan-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations has led to the rapid development of bilateral relations. The implementation of the national leader's oil strategy has laid the groundwork for a new trilateral cooperation format. Trilateral meetings and agreements signed for the implementation of energy projects were a sneak of this format.

The Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation format was formalized at the Summit of Heads of States held in Trabzon, Turkey on April 29-30, 2002 [26, s.509]. The main purpose of the summit, initiated by Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, was to discuss ways to solve security problems in the region, as well as in all three countries, the security of the East-West corridor, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil export pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the joint efforts to combat international terrorism.

To implement comprehensive cooperation in all areas in the region, it is necessary, first of all, to resolve existing regional conflicts and resolutely fight terrorism and organized crime. In this regard, the importance of the Trabzon Summit was enormous. The signing ceremony of the "Agreement between the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Turkey and Georgia on Combating Terrorism, Organized Crime and Other Serious Crimes" was held between the Interior Ministers of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia on April 30 [36]. The agreement stipulates that the parties will take effective measures to ensure the security, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, and the prevention of the preparation and commission of terrorist acts against citizens, including diplomatic missions in their countries, to establish a security system to protect the East-West Energy Corridor in the framework of close coordination and cooperation in combating terrorist acts, illegal migration and human trafficking, regulation of information exchange and other relevant issues based on a protocol drawn up jointly by the three states, etc.

During the rule of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations, and Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation were not only preserved but also rose to the level of strategic partnership. During these years, important meetings were held between the heads of state of the three countries in a tripartite format. It would be appropriate to emphasize the importance of such a summit held in Tbilisi in 2014. The Tbilisi Summit with the participation of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Turkey Abdullah Gul, and President of Georgia Giorgi Margvelashvili contributed to the further expansion of relations and successful cooperation between the countries [21, p.235]. Speaking at a press conference after the trilateral meeting in Tbilisi, President Ilham Aliyev stressed the importance of the summit for the development of trilateral cooperation:

"I am sure that today's summit will be very important for the further development of our trilateral cooperation. Azerbaijan is connected with Georgia and Turkey by history, historical ties, culture, friendship, and brotherhood between our peoples. Our bilateral relations are also built on this solid foundation. It has already been tested.

Both Georgia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan have very close relations based on friendship and brotherhood. I am very glad that the tripartite format is already showing its significance. Trilateral meetings have been held in the past. Because, of course, there have been summits in connection with the implementation of international projects. Today's summit was important both for an analysis of the work done in previous years, and at the same time, and most importantly, I think that today there was a very broad and sincere exchange of views on future cooperation” [21, p.243].

The Trabzon Declaration, the Batumi Joint Communiqué, the Ganja, Kars, Tbilisi, and Baku Declarations signed during the meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the three countries are of great importance in terms of political dialogue and the implementation of special trilateral projects. It should be noted that the traditional trilateral meetings of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey have been held since 2012.

The first of these meetings was held in Trabzon on the initiative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey [35]. At the meeting held on June 8, 2012, along with regional issues, it was agreed to develop cooperation in all areas and promote regional stability and security, while protecting mutual interests. The Trabzon Declaration signed after the meeting stated that 20 years have passed since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the parties, the three countries aim to ensure peace and stability in the South Caucasus and improve the social welfare of the region through economic cooperation. The statement also stressed the satisfaction of the parties with the development of bilateral relations and political dialogue between the countries and reaffirmed their determination to further develop trilateral cooperation in the political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian spheres.

The second meeting of the Azerbaijani, Georgian and Turkish Foreign Ministers took place on March 28, 2013, in Batumi, Georgia [6]. In the Batumi Communiqué signed as a result of the meeting, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to the provisions of the Trabzon Declaration and reiterated the need for a peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region based on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of borders. One of the practical results of the second meeting held in Batumi in the above-mentioned format was the Tripartite Sectoral Cooperation Action Plan for 2013-2015. It was important that the meeting took place in Batumi and Georgian Foreign Minister Maya Panjikidze's statement at a post-meeting press conference that "Georgia has close and friendly relations with its strategic partners Turkey and Azerbaijan" was considered very important in the context of the change of government in Georgia.

The third similar meeting took place in February 2014 in Ganja [20]. The meeting discussed the work done by the Foreign Ministers of the three countries since the signing of the Trabzon Declaration and the Tripartite Sectoral Cooperation Action Plan for 2013-2015 to date, the problems were discussed and there was a wide exchange of views on future goals. Emphasizing the importance of trilateral meetings for the development of cooperation in the Ganja Declaration signed at the end of the meeting, it was decided to identify political, economic, trade relations, as well as humanitarian

areas such as environmental protection, culture, science, education, health, tourism, sports as new areas for expanding ties. The decision to hold a summit of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Leaders, adding a new stage to the tripartite political format of relations at this meeting, confirmed that the expectations within the trilateral relations were met and the parties were interested in further expanding ties.

The fourth meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey was held in December 2014 in Kars, Turkey [8]. During the meeting, which was a continuation of previous meetings, the sides exchanged views on the implementation of the decisions taken at previous meetings, emphasizing the importance of regional cooperation on issues of mutual interest. The Kars Declaration signed as a result of the meeting is an important document in which the parties specify political and economic issues and reaffirm the strategic partnership.

On February 19, 2016, the 5th trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey was held in Tbilisi [32]. During the meeting, the ministers expressed satisfaction with the holding of regular trilateral meetings and reaffirmed their intention to strengthen peace, security, and stability in the region. In the Tbilisi Declaration signed as a result of the meeting, the parties strongly condemned the horrific terrorist attacks in Turkey in February 2016, the Azerbaijani and Georgian Foreign Ministers expressed unwavering solidarity with Turkey, their deep condolences to the Turkish people, and their strong partnership with Turkey in the fight against terrorism. The declaration also stressed the successful results of economic and transport projects implemented in the framework of trilateral cooperation, the great importance of ensuring the sustainable, stable, and secure development of oil and gas infrastructure.

On September 6, 2017, the sixth trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey took place in Baku [11]. At the meeting, the Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to further expanding cooperation based on strategic partnership, good neighborliness, mutual respect, and trust, and reaffirmed their mutual respect and strong support for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of internationally recognized borders. It was stressed during the talks that the ongoing conflicts in the region undermine peace, stability, and economic development and require a political solution based on the above-mentioned principles of international law. It was decided to development of trade and economic cooperation, thereby strengthening efforts to meet the actual potential in terms of investment and trade promotion, further strengthening cooperation in energy, transport, telecommunications, industry, environment, education, science, culture, tourism, and sports through joint projects and programs. The Baku Declaration was signed between the ministers at the meeting.

In October 2018, the seventh ministerial meeting took place in the historic Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul, Turkey [25]. Exchanging views on the importance of joint economic projects and other issues on the agenda, the parties noted that the trilateral meetings further accelerated the development of cooperation. During the meeting, they stressed the importance of peace, stability, cooperation, and development of the three countries, Turkey's constant support for the territorial integrity of

Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the importance of resolving existing problems peacefully and within the framework of international law. As a result of the meeting, the parties signed the Istanbul Declaration.

In December 2019, the eighth trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey was held in Tbilisi [33]. The meeting focused on further strengthening economic and trade cooperation through the implementation of joint projects and programs in the fields of energy, transport, telecommunications, innovation, technology, industry, agriculture, tourism, and the environment, using the existing potential to promote investment and trade, as well as cooperation. Emphasizing the important role of the Marmaray project as part of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Iron Silk Road in facilitating competitive transport between Asia and Europe, the Ministers agreed to speed up the completion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway for its full operation, as well as to increase the volume of freight and passenger traffic by this railway, as well as to increase the capacity of the line to strengthen these roads and to complete the work to eliminate the lack of infrastructure. The importance of establishing a Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan committee on multimodal transport cooperation was stressed at the meeting. They discussed the importance of adopting an Action Plan on Tripartite Sectoral Cooperation for 2020-2022. At the end of the meeting, the parties signed the Tbilisi Declaration [33].

The priorities of the political line of cooperation created and developed by Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are common. These directions are the existence of independent, political and economic stability in the South Caucasus, the existence of countries living in peace and cooperation in mutual relations, adapted to Western civilization, their mutual support under these conditions, acceptance, and protection of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of the borders of states within the norms of international law. This is a point of view adopted by all three countries, by the individual interests of each, as well as the norms of international law, and with its successful results has created conditions for strengthening and expanding trilateral cooperation from year to year. Over the years, high-level meetings have repeatedly stressed the commitment of the three countries to this political line. Mutual support has always been observed both at international events and platforms and in specific situations where there is a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. The support of Azerbaijan and Turkey during the military aggression against Georgia in 2008, especially the invaluable fraternal assistance of Azerbaijan, is a clear example of this attitude. The fact that Georgia closed its air and land routes for the transportation of Armenian military cargo during the battles in the direction of Tovuz in July 2020 as a result of the Armenian aggression and in violation of the ceasefire by the Armenians on September 27, 2020, especially the tremendous political and moral support provided by Turkey on all platforms is proof that this cooperation will be further strengthened in the future.

Energy projects

Although Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral cooperation after the collapse of the USSR was based on common economic interests, at the same time, it served the national interests of all three countries. Thus, the fact that Azerbaijan is a source and producer of hydrocarbon resources, Georgia's geographical position, and transit opportunities, and Turkey's domestic energy needs and the status of a regional hub are the natural foundations of trilateral cooperation. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines, and the Southern Gas Corridor are the mainstays of this cooperation.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export pipeline is one of the foundations of trilateral cooperation. The construction of this pipeline as the main export pipeline was first identified on May 15, 1998, with the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey [26, p.325].

October 29, 1998, in the Turkish Grand National Assembly President of Turkey Suleyman Demirel, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov and US Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson signed the Ankara Declaration, which defines the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route, to deliver energy resources of the Caspian region, especially Azerbaijani oil to world markets [9]. This historic document announced to the world the determination of the parties to build the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main pipeline.

On November 18, 1999, at the Ciragan Palace in Istanbul as part of the OSCE Istanbul Summit, an agreement was signed between the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Turkey on the transportation of crude oil through the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export pipeline. [12] On April 28, 2000, at the US State Department, representatives of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia signed the final document of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export oil pipeline. [26, p.343] The parliaments of all three countries ratified the document. This was the next successful step taken to transport Caspian oil to world markets. An agreement on the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export oil pipeline was signed in Tbilisi on October 18 and in Turkey on October 19 of the same year. Finally, after several years of intense negotiations, meetings, and agreements, the groundbreaking ceremony for the Azerbaijani section of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export oil pipeline was held on September 18, 2002, at the Sangachal terminal, on May 23, 2003, in the city of Tetri-Skaro in the Georgian part. The filling of the oil pipeline started on May 25, 2005, and on May 28, 2006, the oil flowing through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline reached the port of Ceyhan [10].

The implementation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export oil pipeline project is not only very economic but also political. This project and its implementation is a guarantor of peace, tranquility, and security in the Caucasus region. The steel pipe is one of the ties that connect Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey more closely.

One of the energy projects in partnership with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia is the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (South Caucasus Pipeline) gas pipeline project, designed to transport gas from the Shah Deniz field in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea.

Construction of the South Caucasus Pipeline began on October 16, 2004, the day the Azerbaijani and Georgian sections of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline were connected [10]. The pipeline, which has been under construction for about two years, began transporting gas to Georgia in late 2006 and to Turkey in June 2007 [16].

The Southern Gas Corridor project is perhaps the largest of the projects co-operated by Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia. According to the project, gas produced from Shah Deniz Phase 2 will be transported from the Caspian Sea to Europe over a distance of 3,500 kilometers. This required the expansion of several existing infrastructure and the construction of a new pipeline chain. Expansion of the existing South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) through a new parallel pipeline across Azerbaijan and Georgia, Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) implemented under the agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey in June 2012 and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project, which is nearing completion under an intergovernmental agreement signed in February 2013 between Albania, Italy, and Greece, are key segments of this corridor.

The foundation of the Southern Gas Corridor was laid on September 20, 2014, at the Sangachal terminal in Baku [17]. Speaking at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Southern Gas Corridor, President Ilham Aliyev said:

“This project is also very useful for our partner countries. There will be no loser as a result of this project. Each party will benefit. Transit countries are also consumer countries. Consumer countries will also achieve diversification of gas sources. This is a project that ensures Europe's energy security” [22].

The first meeting of the Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council was held in Azerbaijan on February 12, 2015, the second on February 29, 2016, and the third on February 23, 2017 [18]. Following the third meeting of the Consultative Council, officials from 12 countries – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Italy, Croatia, Montenegro, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Commission – signed a Joint Declaration [23]. The participants expressed their determination to continue and deepen long-term strategic relations between energy carriers, suppliers, and consumers in the Southern Gas Corridor to ensure a reliable and sustainable supply of gas from Azerbaijan to Georgia, Turkey, and later European countries. Welcoming the significant achievements in the implementation of this project since the 1st and 2nd ministerial meetings in Baku, they stated that they would support the further efforts of the relevant countries in the final approval of all procedures necessary for the timely completion of construction.

On February 15, 2018, the fourth ministerial meeting of the Southern Gas Corridor Consultative Council was held at the Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku [19]. Speaking at the meeting, President Ilham Aliyev noted that significant progress had been made in the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor, most of the work had been done, emphasizing that cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey 20

years ago had made an important contribution to energy development in the region and Europe. On May 29, 2018, the opening ceremony of the first phase of the Southern Gas Corridor project was held at the Sangachal terminal [31]. The Southern Gas Corridor aims to change the energy map of the entire region by connecting gas supplies from the Caspian region to European markets for the first time.

The implementation of these pipeline projects serves to build regional cooperation, strengthen the economic development of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, maintain political stability and democracy, and thus contribute to peace in the region and the world. With the implementation of each new project, new strong links are added to the very important, strong, sustainable chain of relations between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, which rises to a high level.

Economical cooperation

The economic potential of all three countries, favorable geographical position, great transit opportunities, as well as the implemented Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, Southern Gas Corridor, East-West transport corridor, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway projects have also made this trio a necessary link in effective economic cooperation between Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey business forums organized in a trilateral format, action plans for sectoral cooperation are another indicator of the regional strategic partnership between the countries. At the same time, it is a provider of development in tourism, energy, agriculture, environmental protection, humanitarian, and sports. Drawing general outlines of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trade and economic relations, business forums traditionally organized since 2012 have given impetus to friendship, good neighborliness, and fruitful cooperation between the two countries. At these forums, the relevant ministers of the three countries meet with representatives of the business world, identify areas where countries are strong and that will benefit the development of relations, cooperate in solving existing problems, exchange views. Such events also include presentations on the economies of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia, business and investment opportunities in these countries, and bilateral meetings between businessmen.

The first Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey business forum was held in Tbilisi in February 2012 by the Azerbaijan Export and Investment Promotion Foundation (AZPROMO), the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) and the Georgian National Investment Agency "Invest in Georgia" with the participation of more than 350 businessmen [34]. The forum made a special contribution to the development of relations by providing opportunities for representatives of companies operating in agriculture, construction, tourism, textiles, energy, real estate, and pharmaceuticals to get to know each other. In June of the same year, the second business forum was held in Kars, Turkey. Speakers at the event praised the trilateral economic cooperation, called the business forums "Three Seas Project" and said that they would be open to the whole world, connecting the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean.

The third Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey business forum was held in Gabala in May 2013, organized by the Ministry of Economic Development of Azerbaijan, AZPROMO, the Georgian National Investment Agency "Invest in Georgia" and the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Organization (DEIK) [27]. Speaking at the forum, the Azerbaijani Minister of Economic Development stressed that as a result of the political will and joint efforts of the country's leaders, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey relations have reached the level of strategic cooperation, and regional cooperation between the countries is an example in the world.

The fourth Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Business Forum was held in March 2015 in Batumi [15]. The business forum was attended by more than 350 officials and businessmen working in agriculture, industry, construction, finance, ICT, logistics, consulting, health, and other fields from all three countries, including more than 100 from Azerbaijan.

The 5th Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Business Forum was held in Istanbul in February 2017 [24]. Along with officials, Azerbaijan was represented at the event by about 50 businessmen working in agriculture, industry, construction, finance, health, and other fields. In total, the business forum was attended by more than 250 businessmen from all three countries.

The development and deepening of regional integration is of particular importance in demonstrating high resilience to the negative effects of the global financial, economic and social crisis, more effective use of the region's potential, as well as the sustainable socio-economic development of the three countries. From this point of view, the expansion of Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia political and economic cooperation is very important for all three countries and for the region as a whole. The political will of the heads of state, strategic partnership, historically formed a friendship, neighborly relations, the relevant legislative framework in the economic sphere, a favorable investment climate in all three countries, rich natural resources, availability of qualified human resources, extensive trade, and investment cooperation between the countries, favorable geographical position and large transit opportunities, Strategic projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Southern Gas Corridor, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, "Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia Energy Bridge", high-level contacts between business circles, the productive activities of AZPROMO, ASK, TIKa, DEIK, KOSGEB, Invest in Georgia and other organizations are the main factors determining the successful regional economic cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia.

Transport cooperation

The development of East-West trade relations has also increased the value of the Central Asia-Caspian-Black Sea transport corridor. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey have an irreplaceable role in this regard in terms of geographical location. The European Union's TRACECA (Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor) program, one of the most important East-West transport projects, was launched in May 1993 at a conference in Brussels with the participation of trade and transport ministers from the Caucasus and

Central Asia [1]. Since that date, the main purpose of the program, of which Azerbaijan and Georgia have been members, and Turkey since 2000, is to assist member countries in restoring their transport infrastructure, to create the shortest transport corridor connecting Europe and Asia, and thus the integration of the region into the West, as well as a reliable transport system that serves the implementation of EU programs aimed at reviving and developing their economies. In this regard, the TRACECA project, which connects Asia and Europe, can be considered one of the elements of the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation. The Trabzon Declaration signed between the three countries in 2012 also expressed support for this program.

The most important component of trilateral transport links is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. This railway line is one of the important factors contributing to regional stability and development, playing the role of a strategic link in the creation of a transport corridor between Asia and Europe.

Negotiations on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway connection project began in 1993 at a meeting of the Joint Transport Commission between Turkey and Georgia in Ankara [13]. The protocol on the implementation of this project, signed in 2002 at a meeting of Turkish-Georgian transport ministers in Istanbul, Turkey, provides for preparations for the project. The first official discussions on the project took place during the official visit of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev to Georgia in 2004. In May 2005, the heads of state of the three countries signed a declaration on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway in Baku. The declaration was, in fact, an indication of the importance that the heads of state of the three countries attached to this railway.

The legal basis of the project was completed by the agreement on the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway signed in February 2007 in Tbilisi by the three heads of state [2]. Construction of the Georgian section of the railway began in February 2007, and in July 2008, the Turkish section. Finally, on October 30, 2017, the opening ceremony of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway took place [14].

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line creates great opportunities for closer transport links not only between the three countries, but also between other countries interested in using the services of this transport corridor. The implementation of the project and the construction of a railway tunnel under the Bosphorus will connect the Trans-European and Trans-Asian railway networks, transporting cargo and passengers directly to Europe and Asia via Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. With the commissioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, it has become a reality that container trains go directly from China to Europe and the Mediterranean. This will greatly benefit the economic development of all three countries, as well as other interested countries.

Trilateral cooperation in the field of defense

There is also a successful trilateral cooperation in the field of defense. Similar security problems in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia are among the factors contributing to defense cooperation. The work done in this area is in no way directed against third countries, but is a direct manifestation of strengthening regional security. Since 2014,

regular meetings have been held at the level of Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia.

These meetings were held on August 19, 2014 at the Headquarters of the Special Forces in Nakhchivan between the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, the Minister of Defense of Georgia Irakli Alasania and the Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Turkey Ismet Yilmaz [29]. During the meeting, the sides exchanged views on the military-political situation and security issues in the region, discussed a number of issues of mutual interest in military cooperation, and agreed to hold joint exercises. The Nakhchivan meeting of the defense ministers of the three countries and the impetus given by this meeting to trilateral cooperation in the field of defense are important not only for the military, but also for the political and economic security of the region.

The next trilateral meeting of the Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey was held in Tbilisi on April 2, 2015 [4]. The meeting reviewed the progress of joint cooperation in the field of defense and discussed regional security issues, activities to ensure peace, stability and economic development in the region, as well as other issues of mutual interest. It was noted that it was important to hold trilateral joint exercises in order to increase the combat capability of the Armed Forces of the three countries and achieve mutual operational compatibility. The meeting also considered it expedient to establish joint seminars and conferences, a trilateral format of cooperation in military education and military-technical fields, and trilateral trainings on the protection of oil and gas pipelines.

The next meeting of Defense Ministers was held in Gabala in May 2016. In this regard, Georgian Defense Minister Tinatin Khidasheli and Turkish National Defense Minister Ismet Yilmaz visited Azerbaijan.

A trilateral meeting of the Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey was held in Batumi on May 23, 2017 [5]. The trilateral meeting discussed prospects for military cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, regional security and joint protection of economic projects in the region, and other issues. During the discussions, it was noted that trilateral cooperation will contribute to security in the region, joint protection of regional projects will contribute not only to the security of projects, but also to stability in the region, improving the social welfare and development of peoples.

One of the most important meetings in terms of the development of trilateral defense cooperation can be considered the meeting held in Turkey in 2018. Thus, during the meeting in Giresun on March 31, Azerbaijani Defense Minister Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, Turkish National Defense Minister Nureddin Canikli and Georgian Defense Minister Levan Izoria signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia [7]. The adoption of the memorandum is important for ensuring stability and security in the region, as well as a signal against the countries pursuing a policy of aggression.

A trilateral meeting between the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, the Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Turkey Hulusi Akar and the Minister of Defense of Georgia Levan Izoria was held on June 12, 2019 at the Heydar Aliyev Congress Center in Gabala [28]. During the meeting, the Defense Ministers discussed the current military-political situation in the region, the development of military cooperation in the trilateral format, ensuring the security of regional projects.

The main purpose of Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia cooperation in the field of defense is to organize regular meetings of defense ministers and other officials, cooperation in the field of defense industry, exchange of experience in military training, consultations on issues of common interest in the relevant field, holding joint trainings and conferences, exchange knowledge, experience and personnel between military schools, academies and other educational institutions, and establish direct communication mechanisms between military units, headquarters and other institutions. At the heart of this cooperation is mutual respect for the territorial integrity and security of countries. The main factor influencing the continuation and expansion of cooperation is the global energy and transport projects implemented in the region.

Cooperation in the field of custom

One of the areas of trilateral cooperation is successful cooperation in the field of customs. The customs authorities of the three countries are constantly launching new regional initiatives and cooperating to increase the competitiveness of the transport corridor through modern customs control mechanisms. For this purpose, intensive meetings are held between relevant government agencies. The statements and declarations adopted at the meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the three countries also stressed the importance of cooperation in the field of customs, and decided to establish a tripartite commission.

One of the meetings, which gave a new direction to cooperation in the field of customs, was held in Baku in 2017. Following the trilateral high-level meeting of the heads of the customs services of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey on July 19, a "Joint Statement on strengthening trilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey on customs issues" was adopted [3]. This statement is very important for the facilitation and safe trade of countries. Before the signing of the statement, at the meeting, held on July 18 with the participation of customs and internal affairs officials of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, as well as railway specialists, to speed up customs and border crossing procedures in connection with the commissioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the exchange of primary railway information on customs, exchange of preliminary information on postal operations by rail, international railway transportation mutual recognition of the results of customs control and other issues were considered.

It is clear that successful trilateral cooperation in the field of customs is one of the main factors influencing the development of trade and economic relations, as well as directly improving the social welfare of the region's population.

Conclusion

One of the main goals of the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia is to make the South Caucasus an area of peace, stability and security. In all meetings and documents adopted within the framework of trilateral cooperation, the parties emphasize the importance of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, emphasizing their commitment to UN resolutions, the Helsinki Final Act and the basic norms of international law. This area of security is in the interests not only of the three countries but of the world community as a whole. It is known that global energy and transport-communication projects implemented in the region are also very important for the world. Along with Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia, a number of foreign companies and concerns also participate in these projects. Billions of dollars have been invested in the region to implement projects, and investment projects have been implemented. Stability and development in the region are quite important for the functioning of these institutions. The implemented energy projects are aimed at ensuring Europe's energy security. From this point of view, it is not difficult to imagine the importance of ensuring the security of power lines passing through the region. The importance of the security of transport projects against the background of the growing weight of the Far East in the world economy is probably quite clear. As a result, the deepening and expanding trilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia in the South Caucasus covers not only the political, economic, trade, transport, defense and humanitarian spheres, but also responds the interests of the world community.

Cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey serves to maintain peace and stability in the region, strengthen the political and economic independence of states, increase the level of welfare, as well as the safe operation of foreign companies and investors. Taking all this into account, Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation can be assessed as a factor of regional stability and a guarantor of lasting peace and development in the South Caucasus.

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