

RUSSIA & EURASIA STUDIES CENTRE

A Weaker Russia and the West's Opportunity in the South Caucasus

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Executive Summary

In mid-2021, the Russian Federation proposed the creation of a new diplomatic forum for the South Caucasus. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, suggested that a '3+3 Format' comprised of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Armenia, Russia, and Iran could be used to resolve disputes and build economic ties within the region.

This proposal was controversial from the outset, harking back to an era in which larger countries would attempt to determine how smaller countries within their 'spheres of influence' could act. The mixed reception was further complicated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the geopolitical fallout of Vladimir Putin's war.

While Russia's proposals would appear to be on the backburner for the near-term future, Moscow's regional ambitions remain. Its suggested format was one indicator of a fierce conflict for influence taking place in a region left behind by the Western world. China, through its belt and road initiative, and Iran, through military and diplomatic means, are also highly engaged in the promotion of interests not necessarily in line with the West's.

Putin's setback in Ukraine has started to feed a perception in Eurasia that Russia is weaker than previously thought. With Moscow's attention diverted, there is a great opportunity for the West to seize the initiative within the region, correcting a legacy of under-investment and lack of attention.

This research briefing sets out how Western leaders can build influence in the South Caucasus. It begins with an overview of the divisions created by Russia's war in Ukraine, then analyses the motivations behind Moscow's proposed 3+3 format. It then sets out Iran's regional aspirations, China's activity, and the

potential for Western engagement.

A Weakened Russia, The West's Chance

Since 1991, Russia has sought to rebuild its sphere of influence in neighbouring regions. Frozen conflicts were created by Russia and its proxy forces in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), Moldova (Transnistria), and Ukraine (Crimea); Belarus was rendered a client state of the Kremlin; and in Kazakhstan Russia supported President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev by sending CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) forces to suppress protests, in an intervention modelled on the exercise which secured Alexander Lukashenka's power in Belarus.¹ Armenia, following defeat in the 2020 Second Karabakh War, allowed Russia to increase its strategic foothold in the country and in Nagorno-Karabakh through the placement of military assets following the ceasefire negotiations.²

This strategy of using military force to promote Moscow's interests and keep nearby countries within its sphere of influence has been significantly undermined by the underperformance of the Russian military in Ukraine. From the vantage point of Eurasia, Russia looks wounded and weaker, and a growing chorus of voices is making greater demands of Moscow. At the UN, Russia has not been supported by its allies in Eurasia with the exception of Belarus.

Belarus is also the only nation to have no choice in the matter; since the 2020 elections, President Alexander Lukashenka has been dependent upon the Kremlin and unable to attempt to find balance between Russia and the West. In this context, it is particularly notable that while Russian missiles have been fired at Ukraine from Belarusian territory, Lukashenka has balked at sending his armed forces into Ukraine. Moscow's control only extends so far, and there is a clear concern in Minsk that any such order would result in many soldiers defecting, potentially joining the Belarusian volunteers³ fighting for Ukraine. Within Belarus there has been widespread sabotage of railway tracks preventing supplies reaching Russian troops in Ukraine and additional troops invading.

Armenia and the Central Asian members of the Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation), meanwhile, have adopted a neutral position. This may be due in part to wariness among Central Asian states – particularly Kazakhstan – of supporting revanchist claims. Despite Moscow's intervention in the fuel protests, Kazakhstan's leaders are well aware that Russian nationalists view the country as akin to Ukraine in being an 'artificial state', and have lobbied for the annexation of "Southern Siberia" (Northern Kazakhstan). Armenia, meanwhile, is dependent on Russia for security but wishes to maintain ties with the West.

Countries without such close dependencies on Russia have been more overt in their rejection of its war. Azerbaijan has provided Ukraine with humanitarian and energy assistance and has been critical of Russian peacekeepers in the Karabakh region, making it more likely Azerbaijan will not agree to the renewal of their mandate in 2025. Georgia, has balked at supporting Ukraine and imposing sanctions against Russia, but has alongside Ukraine applied for EU

membership.

Russia's war in Ukraine has highlighted weaknesses in Moscow's desired Eurasian sphere, in some cases widening gaps with its key partners in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. This is a valuable opening which the West should exploit.

Russia's 3+3 Proposal

Russia's proposed 3+3 initiative had four goals. The first was to cement the South Caucasus as a Russian-led sphere of influence, shared to a degree with Turkey and Iran as unequal partners.

The second goal was to draw Turkey through partnership in the region away from NATO and the US, in the pursuit of a long-standing Soviet and Russian goal of sowing divisions within the West. Ankara's unique situation has been highlighted by its positioning throughout the war in Ukraine, simultaneously arming Kyiv while refraining from imposing sanctions on Moscow, with the result that it has been able to host peace talks between the two sides.

The third goal was to reduce the ability of Azerbaijan and Georgia to independently ensure their military security by holding military exercises with the country or organisation of their choice, rendering them dependent to a greater degree on the goodwill of Moscow.

The fourth goal was to use the format to exclude NATO and the EU from the region, in line with the 'security guarantees' Russia demanded prior to the war in Ukraine.⁴ For three decades, Russia has opposed the use of UN peacekeepers and NATO enlargement in Eurasia. The launch of the Eastern partnership in 2009 saw 'EU enlargement' added to its list of undesired outcomes.

The written 'security guarantees' would have seen the US 'deny accession to [NATO] to the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' – denying Georgia a long-sought objective. They would also have demanded the US refrained from establishing 'military bases on the territory of the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization', from using 'their infrastructure for any military activities' or developing 'bilateral military cooperation'.⁵

Georgia, Azerbaijan, and some Central Asian states have long undertaken military cooperation with NATO. In the first two cases, this cooperation stretches back to the launch of the Partnership for Peace Programme in 1994, while NATO members cooperated with Central Asian states after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the fight against Al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Alongside the 3+3 proposals and the written security guarantees, Lavrov has also emphasised the importance of ratifying the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, as this would ensure "no foreign states would interfere in these regional affairs." This interpretation of the convention is dangerous for the South Caucasus, and particularly Azerbaijan, as the three states are

Caspian littoral states. Lavrov mentioned particularly, Article 3, section 6 of the convention that states “The Parties shall carry out their activities in the Caspian Sea in accordance with the following principle of the non-presence in the Caspian Sea of armed forces not belonging to the parties.”⁶

It is not hard to see what Russia would gain from the use of a diplomatic forum which would bring the South Caucasus into closer alignment with Moscow is simply another way of achieving the goal of locking the West out of the region, solidifying Russian influence, and forming a bulwark against Western interests.

The regional response

It is, disappointingly, easy to see why both Turkey and Azerbaijan would have been attracted to some degree by the 3+3 initiative. The US has paid little attention to the South Caucasus for over a decade, a pattern of neglect that does not seem likely to change under President Joe Biden.

Additionally, US relations with Turkey have deteriorated over a long period despite Ankara’s importance as a NATO member and host to US military bases. The recent Summit for democracy did not invite Turkey and yet its democratic development is no worse than Ukraine’s, with the opposition allowed to stand in elections and in control of many cities across the country.

The benefits of engagement for Iran are simpler. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian repeated the common refrain that Tehran “will not tolerate geopolitical change and map change in the Caucasus”, while also expressing “serious concerns about the presence of terrorists and Zionists” in the South Caucasus, in an attack on Azerbaijan’s strategic partnership with Israel.⁷

Iran would attempt to use the format to demand Azerbaijan reduce the number of its military exercises. Amir-Abdollahian said “Azerbaijan has held six military exercises with foreign countries, I think these are provocative actions. Such a volume of exercises does not cause positive emotions. Iran held only one exercise inside its own territory and informed all countries of the region through diplomatic channels.”⁸

Georgia is understandably less enthusiastic, with Minister of Foreign Affairs David Zalkaliani stating that it would be “very hard” for Georgia to participate.⁹ During President Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency, Georgia has participated in a number of regional infrastructure projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline constructed during President Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency.

It has however remained wary of aligning itself with either Iran or Russia in regional projects, and will likely remain cool to any 3+3 Format until Russia withdraws from South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹⁰ No politician or a high-ranking official has openly supported the 3+3 Format in Georgia and it has only received marginal support.¹¹ Georgia refused to attend the 3+3 meeting in December 2021 in Moscow.¹²

This initial rebuffing of the 3+3 format, and the Russian military's difficulties in Ukraine, have dealt a significant blow to Russia's ambitions in the South Caucasus. This is a valuable opening for the West; the door is open for an alternative structure for the region which looks to integrate the three South Caucasian states into NATO and EU initiatives and there is a clear appetite for these initiatives on the part of at least some of these countries.

Iranian Aspirations

Russia is not the only 'large' member of the 3+3 looking to assert its sphere of influence in the South Caucasus. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian expressed his support for the proposed format in a meeting with Lavrov.

Iran's concern is fundamentally opposition to border changes in the region. Tehran has criticised Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises, stating it "would not tolerate the presence of terrorists and Zionists in the region", in a reference to Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Israel which has existed since 2007-2008.^{13 14}

Lavrov stated the Kremlin is opposed to military build-ups in the South Caucasus (presumably excluding Russia's) and against "provocative" actions". Iranian politician Mahmoud Begash stated if Turkish adventurism and Azerbaijan's inappropriate behaviour continued, Iran would "return Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh to the main owner - Iran".¹⁵

In reality, Iran, a predominantly Shiite Muslim country, has lost influence over Azerbaijan, which is closely aligned with Turkey. Iran is seeking to compensate for this strategic loss by closely cooperating with Armenia, offering security guarantees on its territorial integrity and gaining a strategic foothold in the Zangezur corridor. Iran is not pleased at the prospect of this corridor's creation reconnecting the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia with Turkey, hindering Iran's commercial ties with Armenia and weakening its influence as a transit route.

Turkey's aims of incorporating Turkmenistan's oil and gas into the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline also undermines Iranian interests. An agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to develop their disputed Kyapaz/Sardar Caspian gas-field could facilitate exports to the Mediterranean.

Ankara's policy of energy recalibration has reduced dependence on Iranian and Russian energy imports, and on 31 December 2020, the first Azerbaijani shipment of natural gas arrived in Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), a 3,500 km pipeline transporting gas from the Shah Deniz field in Azerbaijan's sector of the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Turkey to Italy. Turkey supported this strategic energy pipeline project, and assisted Azerbaijan in obtaining European political and financial support. Since the early 1990s, Turkey has blocked a transit route for Iranian gas to Europe, while the US government has repeatedly blocked Iranian efforts to build oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea region. Turkey seeks to maintain its status as a

transit hub for energy and trade, while Iran is perturbed at becoming yet more excluded from energy transit.¹⁶

As EU countries seek to diversify their energy sources, planned gas pipelines from Azerbaijan through Turkish territory to Europe are likely to increase. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the West's sanctions against Russia and taking into account Azerbaijan's statements about boosting gas supplies to Europe and doubling capacity in the future,¹⁷ its importance as a supplier is likely to increase.

Iran's neo-imperialism views the South Caucasus as its sphere of influence and Azerbaijan as a renegade Persian province. Southern Azerbaijan lies in Iran and is inhabited by more Azeris than in Azerbaijan proper. Iran believes its interests were not properly taken into account after the 2020 Second Karabakh war.

Iran also regards the Caspian Sea as an exclusive zone shared first with the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Since then, other littoral states, such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have improved ties with the backing of Turkey. Recent agreements between Turkey and Turkmenistan are viewed unfavourably by Iran which is seeking to block the Trans-Caspian Pipeline.

In addition to pursuing this sphere of influence, Iran has economic aims. Its view of the 3+3 format proposal would combine a 'North-South Corridor' with the 'Persian Gulf Black Sea Transit Corridor', linking Tehran with Azerbaijan and Russia, as well as with Georgia, Bulgaria, Greece, Iran, and Armenia as a route into the European market.

Iran's interests are in conflict with those of Turkey. The 2020 ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia brokered by Turkey and Russia only addresses local and domestic factors in the conflict while ignoring broader external aspects. Turkey and Russia both gained a strategic foothold in Nagorno-Karabakh after the war while Iran was side-lined. Iran's muscle-flexing near Azerbaijan's borders demonstrates Tehran's unwillingness to let the matter end there. Iran's muscle-flexing and confrontation with Azerbaijan in late 2021 is likely due in large part due to the loss of transit fees from the newly opened economic corridor to Nakhchivan, which Tehran views as threatening its geopolitical and geo-economic interests.¹⁸

Despite this unhappiness, Iran has to tread carefully in supporting Armenian security guarantees since the war. Tehran is wary of angering the thirty million Azerbaijanis living in the northern provinces of Iran¹⁹, and is on shaky ground supporting Christian Armenia over the "land of Islam (Shiite Azerbaijan)."²⁰

Chinese Goals in the South Caucasus

While not included in the proposed 3+3 format, China too possesses an active presence in the South Caucasus. President Xi Jinping has called for further development and enhancement of Chinese-Azerbaijani ties, emphasising Baku's place within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²¹

Azerbaijan, meanwhile, has supported China's policies in Xinjiang, Hong Kong,

and Taiwan.²² Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev has emphasised the need for more Chinese companies and investments, expressing full support for the BRI.

Mustafayev has also mentioned the importance of exporting non-oil products to the Chinese market.²³ Azerbaijan and China signed an 800 million USD economic package in 2019 during the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, with multiple investments in local industry. Azerbaijan's dependency on revenues from oil and gas explains its eagerness to crack the Chinese market.²⁴

Following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's military victory and establishment of connections with Nakhchivan has opened the doors to a significant diminishment of the role of Iran for transportation logistics. This newly emerging economic corridor may offer China a second route to Europe through the South Caucasus, with Azerbaijan playing the role of the middleman in China's Digital Silk Road initiative,²⁵ as indicated in the agreement signed by China Telecom and Azer Telecom on data traffic.²⁶

Disruption of trade in the Nakhchivan economic corridor is not to China's or the BRI's benefit. Beijing stressed the importance of the China-Europe Railway Express trains traveling along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route where the number of trains has grown significantly.²⁷ It is not coincidental that Beijing and Baku are beginning to cooperate on defence matters, with Azerbaijan purchasing Qasirga T-300 systems and Polonez Multiple Launch Rocket Systems from China, and signing an agreement of military cooperation.²⁸

The spread of Chinese influence in Azerbaijan provides a counterweight to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy and the West in general. China's growing influence in the South Caucasus is also at odds with the Russian-led 3+3 Format.

Chinese trade and investment in Georgia has grown steadily in recent years, with a free trade agreement – the first in the South Caucasus – signed in 2017, permitting Georgian products to enter the Chinese market with no tariffs.²⁹ Georgia also received a 300 million USD investment from the Chinese-owned Hualing Group in the construction of a new town. Hualing Group is the largest foreign investor in the country.³⁰

Since 2018, trade between the two countries has exceeded 1 billion USD.³¹ Although Chinese influence has so far been limited to commerce and infrastructure, Beijing could use the BRI to enter South Caucasus as a major geopolitical player. Even though high-ranking Chinese officials have claimed the BRI will not be used for geopolitics,³² this is unlikely to be the case in practice.

Beijing has been actively engaged in Georgia's infrastructure projects for an extended period. The Chinese state-owned company Railway 23rd Bureau Group Co" will build a 13km section of the Kvesheti-Kobi road in Georgia, contributing to the connections between Kvesheti and Kobi.³³ China is also building one of the most important infrastructure projects in Georgia; the Shorapani-Argveta section of the Rikoti Pass. State-owned China National Technical Import and Export Corporation and Guizhou Highway Engineering Group signed an

agreement with Georgia to finalise its construction. The Asian Development Bank provided more than 200 million USD for this project that includes four roads, 96 bridges, and 53 tunnels. The travel time between the Red Bridge and Batumi will be halved; instead of taking 8-9 hours, it will take 4-4.5 hours.³⁴

Close Chinese-Georgian cooperation could negatively affect the latter's integration into NATO and the EU. A Chinese foothold in Georgia would provide it with the capabilities of playing a more active role in the South Caucasus, particularly in its own frozen conflicts and Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁵

If Chinese influence increases this will impact upon Russia's self-declared sphere of influence. Russia is dependent on China for investment, as a general market and for diplomatic support. The Chinese perceive the BRI as a greater priority than supporting Russia in the South Caucasus.³⁶

Western Responses

Russia, Iran, and China are each pursuing their interests in the vacuum left by a lack of Western leadership in the South Caucasus and Black Sea. While NATO member Turkey has returned to the South Caucasus as a geopolitical player, it is not sufficient in and of itself to offset these trends. It is also not necessarily well-aligned with the interests of other Western states.

The United States views the Black Sea region as an environment that could deter threats from the Middle East and Russia. Georgia could play an important role for the West in this area of security as a bulwark in the South Caucasus against hard and soft security threats.³⁷³⁸ If it is to do so, the US, NATO, and the EU will need to become more involved in promoting security in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region.³⁹

As the West attempts to reduce its dependency on Russian oil and gas, alternative sources could be transported to Europe from the South Caucasus and Caspian Sea through Georgia, Turkey, and the Black Sea.

NATO member Turkey will play a crucial role in containing Russian influence in the South Caucasus, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine, it is countering Russian and Russian-backed forces.⁴⁰

The US should work with pro-Western Georgia and Azerbaijan and normalise relations with Turkey to improve the West's strategic outlook in the Black Sea region. Russia's goal is to deny access to Ukraine to the Black Sea. An enhanced Western security presence in the Black Sea would reduce Russian pressure on Ukraine.⁴¹

In the South Caucasus, only Georgia has declared its aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Georgia, along with Ukraine and Moldova, has an Association Agreement with the EU under the Eastern Partnership, offering integration rather than membership. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has formally applied for EU membership. Brussels should urgently address this request.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have condemned Russia's occupation of Georgian territories, Crimea, and the invasion of Ukraine. Both countries have expressed support for the internationally recognised principle of the territorial integrity of states. The US, NATO, and EU have yet to publicly show their support for the Turkish-Azerbaijani security partnership and yet it is central to countering Iranian influences in the South Caucasus and Greater Middle East.

Conclusion

As Russia, Iran, and China compete for influence in the South Caucasus, there is room for the West to reassert its interest in the region. The poor state of relations between the West and Russia will require NATO and the EU to return to the containment and deterrence of the Cold War era. This will require the US to return to the South Caucasus where it has been all too absent for over a decade. Meanwhile, the EU, now a provider of arms to Ukraine, will need to add a security dimension to be added to the Eastern Partnership.

With Georgia and Ukraine under pressure to suspend their NATO membership goals, they should be rewarded (alongside Moldova) with an EU membership perspective. The war in Ukraine has shown how a grey zone is too tempting for Russian imperialists in countries lying between NATO and the EU and the CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union.

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