

Geopolitical Balance in the South Caucasus

With the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the continuous geopolitical struggle in the Caucasus started to flare up even more. The moves of non-regional actors such as NATO, the EU and regional powers such as Turkey, Russia and Iran have the potential to change the region's geopolitical equation in the medium term. This shows that the struggle has evolved into a new stage. The most important distinguishing feature of this stage is that various alliances have begun to be determined between the extra-regional powers and the regional states Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. However, since these alliances have not taken their final form, they are ready to change any time.

With the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War that broke out at the end of 2020, two important developments took place in terms of geopolitical balances in the region. The first one is the new initiative proposed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev after the war, known as the Caucasus Platform or 3+3 Format. It is expected that the platform set up with the participation of Turkey, Russia and Iran as well as the three South Caucasus states will establish peace in the region. The second important development that emerged after the war is that the West, which has been criticized for staying passive in terms of geopolitical struggle in the Caucasus in recent years, especially the USA, has started to pursue more active politics in the region, especially in Georgia, through mechanisms such as NATO and the EU. As a result of these two developments, the alliances that tried to be formed by various powers in the Caucasus began to become more evident. However, there are many factors among the internal political dynamics of Georgia and Armenia that prevent the successful conclusion of both alliances, which seem to oppose each other.

During his visit to Baku in November 2020 Erdogan stated that the Caucasus Platform, with the participation of Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, will ensure sustainable peace and stability in the region and that all parties will gain economic benefits. At the same time, Erdogan stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin also views this project positively. Less than a month later, Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili's statement that Georgia has assumed the role of peace in the Caucasus for centuries and that the Georgian side should not remain passive to the Caucasus Platform initiative was met with great reaction from the opposition. Opposition parties accused Zurbishvili of endangering the country's national security interests, stating that a platform where Russia could participate would not be acceptable by Georgia.

It seems impossible for Georgia to participate in this platform since it sees Russia as the state occupying approximately 20% of its territory. Despite the efforts of the ruling Georgian Dream Party to normalize relations with Russia, its foreign policy approach to Moscow would mean political suicide. Because after the 2008 Georgia-Russia War, Georgia's foreign policy and all of its internal political debates have been carried out in one way or another based on Russia's occupying policies. Therefore, none of Georgian political forces will dare to take such a step, knowing that a positive approach to a project in which one of the leaders is Moscow will lead to accusation of treason to the country.

Also recently, it has been noticeable that there is an unspoken agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran that only regional powers should solve problems in the region. In other words, efforts are being made to prevent non-regional actors such as the EU and the USA from being included in the process. As a matter of fact, the Caucasus Platform initiative should be handled as a result of this thought. This poses great geopolitical risks for Georgia. Because, joining the platform, which includes two geopolitical rivals of the USA such as Russia and Iran, will cause Washington to reverse its friendly attitude in terms of considering Tbilisi as a strategic partner.

Another important issue that should be handled within the scope of the Caucasus Platform is how Armenia approaches this initiative. Above all, one of the parties that will gain the greatest economic profit from taking part in this platform is Armenia. The closure of the borders of Armenia in the west with Turkey and in the east with Azerbaijan since the 1990s has a very negative effect on the country's economy. Two other countries with common borders are Georgia and Iran. Therefore, Armenia's only gateway to the world is Georgia. However, this is not a very safe route, because the lingering conflicts between Russia and Georgia may cause this road to be closed at any moment. As a matter of fact, the Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008 has clearly demonstrated this. Therefore, Armenia should urgently open its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan to achieve economic prosperity.

As a result of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, when a large part of Azerbaijani territories were taken back, Ankara and Baku gave the green light to the solution of their border problem. However, it seems difficult for Yerevan to respond this positively for now. Although Yerevan knows that it will gain the most from this move, the political balances that emerged in the country in the 1990s - and are still valid today - remain a major obstacle to the opening of these borders. Since the political forces in Yerevan know that the one who takes the first step in establishing relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, which are considered the biggest enemies in the Armenian society, will shoot themselves in the foot. Therefore, they will try to avoid it. This becomes even more difficult, especially considering the results of the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. Therefore, while the Moscow-Tbilisi dispute prevents Georgia from joining the Caucasus Platform, the Yerevan-Baku and Yerevan-Ankara disputes interrupt Armenia's participation.

Another important point for the Caucasian Platform initiative is Russia's position. Although Erdogan has expressed that Putin has a positive view of this, there has not been a reasonable statement from Moscow on this issue. In this context, it should be noted that Russia's participation in such a platform would actually mean that it is ready to share its influence in the Caucasus with other regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. Thus, Russia does not welcome the increase in Turkey and Iran's influence in the region through initiatives such as the Caucasus Platform.

On the other hand, Russia, realizing that Turkey has many disagreements with the West in recent years, may try to use the Caucasus platform as a suitable tool for further isolating Turkey. Because Turkey's acts together with Russia and Iran, which are geopolitical rivals of the United States, will lead to further exacerbations in relations between Washington and Ankara. Considering that this platform is particularly suitable for Iran to bypass sanctions, Washington's possible reaction will be understood more easily.

As a matter of fact, it is seen that the West took action in the South Caucasus as soon as the Caucasus Platform came to the agenda. However, this is limited to Georgia for now. Following the telephone conversation between Georgia and the US Defence Minister in March 2021, the Pentagon press service declared, "the USA respects Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and will do its best to strengthen the country's defence against Russia's aggression." On the same date, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said, "NATO's doors are open to Georgia. However, it needs to implement reforms to modernize institutions and fight corruption, regardless of whether it will become a member soon or in the distant future." However, the concept of "a distant future" in NATO's statement has always shaken and continues to shake Georgia's trust in the West. In fact, the positive statements of the Georgian President Zurabishvili towards the Caucasus Platform can be evaluated within this framework. However, this does not mean that Georgia is moving away from the West.

Another important development is the intense contact between the EU and Georgia, which has recently increased. Since November 2020, there has been a political crisis between the main opposition party, the United National Movement - which does not accept the results of the parliamentary election - and the ruling Georgian Dream Party. By March 2021, the EU acted and sent its Special Representative of the President of the European Council to Georgia to bring both parties to the negotiating table. However, statements of the parties indicated that the solution is not close while negotiations are continuing.

As a result, NATO and the EU are in no hurry to accept Georgia as a member. And this undermines Tbilisi's confidence in the West. Although high-level contacts between the two sides have intensified recently, it is difficult to say that there have been important changes in Western policy towards Georgia. Still, it cannot be said that the Caucasus Platform, initiated by Ankara and Baku and excluding the West from the region, will be successful, at least at this stage. Especially the political reality in Armenia and Georgia is one of the factors hindering the implementation of the initiative.