

Trilateral Partnership and Self-Isolation Shape the Geopolitics of the Caucasus

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The opening ceremony of Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway (BTK), which was held on October 30 in Baku, has paved the way for the completion of the historical project for Eurasia in the South Caucasus region. The leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkey and the prime ministers of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia, as well as delegates from Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, attended the ceremony. Therefore, the project is also called “Iron Silk Road”.



The BTK Railway firstly connects the three countries of South Caucasus region, starting from Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey, as the functional link between China and Europe. The railway will carry up to 6 million tons of cargo and one million passengers annually. It is expected to raise the level to 17 million tons of cargo and 3 million passengers by 2030. The construction of the railway started in 2007 and has been completed in ten years due to the geographical and technical difficulties. Currently, a new opportunity emerges for intercontinental transportation from East Asia to Western Europe.

At this situation, Chinese approach towards the Iron Silk Road has a great importance since China is linked with Europe via Russian territory. As an economic giant, China can use the BTK railway after using Kazakhstan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan route by ferry and it would create a

profitable transaction. Chinese goods can reach to Europe within just 15 days with this route.

The BTK project demonstrates the political realities as well as major economic potentials in the region. In this regard, European Union released a statement about the project and underlined the importance of this development: “The European Union welcomes the new rail corridor which, coupled with investments, improved infrastructure, and logistics coordination will provide better connectivity, new business opportunities and increased trade. This is at the heart of its Eastern Partnership as well as of its Central Asia strategy”

On the other side, the project has been realized in accordance with the interstate agreement by Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan although several political instabilities occurred in the region such as Russian-Georgian War and Armenian occupation in the Nagorno-Karabakh. It shows that regional countries have a great opportunity to implement huge economic and energy pro-

jects because these three countries are already linked by Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Gas Pipeline. The newly completed Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway is another contribution to the regional and global economy.

State Power is Declining in the Age of Cooperation

The trilateral cooperation among Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia was declared in 2012. The countries underlined the importance of supporting each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as the peaceful settlement of the conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and the conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia. Regional stability became the key element of future cooperation because if there is no stability, we cannot mention the name of welfare. Therefore, the motto of "deeper regional integration and political consolidation" appeared in the official declaration.

In June 2017, the soldiers of the Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia held joint exercises namely 'Caucasus Eagle 2017'. The countries showed an initiative to protect the region from internal and external threats. External threats can be calculated as a long-term measure but internal threats are literally about the safety of energy pipelines. Hence, in the words of Defense Minister of Azerbaijan, Zakir Hasanov, the protection of oil and gas pipelines became the major aim of the drills when he spoke during another meeting of defense ministers in 2016.

Several months later of the Caucasus Eagle 2017 exercises, the two Caucasus states, Azerbaijan and Georgia have signed a defense deal with Turkey in October 2017 during the trila-

teral meeting and, this military cooperation has been added to the current relationship. Each side discussed the regional security and international terrorism issues for ensuring the security of the regional projects.

For the post-Soviet geography, two major problems are affecting behaviors of the countries: First, political instability and regional conflicts and second, the lack of organizational behavior. So, the trilateral initiative stands as the valuable form of regional cooperation with the help of a NATO member country, Turkey. Both Azerbaijan and Georgia have regional conflicts and they are members of several organizations which are not so efficient to solve the current problems. These two countries figured out that they should establish a different road to push the limits of challenges. It was: Cooperation.

In this respect, two forms of cooperation have been achieved: Political-economic and military. The first one is more institutionalized to follow a sustainable way of gaining benefits. The opening of BTK Railway is the last example of this. Second one grounds on the anarchical system of the world and it is needed to take measures on conflict potentials for protecting the economic interests. So the countries have improved new type of attitudes towards the Western states and organizations and, they try to get maximum benefit in this way.

Azerbaijan and Georgia are becoming dominant players in the post-Soviet geography. Two countries had faced numerous difficulties after the collapse of Soviet Union but their administrations became aware of the importance of the regional cooperation which is the main necessity of the modern global political system. On the other side, their neighbor, Armenia could not follow

the same way due to the political dilemmas. Thus the country became an isolated side in the region. Armenian army has occupied over than 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory, including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions. Due to the occupation, the eastern and western borders are closed with Azerbaijan and Turkey. This situation made the country isolated in the Caucasus. Since the early 1990s, regional and global powers became aware of major economic/energy potentials here and bypassed Armenia in all of the projects. Namely, the region is shaped by energy/economic projects and its geopolitical importance becomes more beneficial than the 1990s with contributions of common initiatives of the neighbor countries without ones which are following different political directions.

Still, Armenia faces new challenges by Russia and Iran which are willing to realize new projects with Azerbaijan. One of them is the North-South Transport Corridor which will bypass Armenia again and connect South East Asia and Europe via Azerbaijani territories. Thus here we are witnessing a dramatic situation: in the same region, two former Soviet countries are adopting the way of cooperation and other is remaining isolated. It damages to the country's position as well as the regional peace and security. Some of the Armenian analysts say that the country should adopt a new policy to overcome its regional isolation, so it is needed to collaborate with new players.

Here it is possible to say that Armenia is not isolated by its neighbors, rather it is making the self-isolation. Cooperation appears as the only chance to get rid of survival situation for Armenia. Azerbaijani administration is also men-

tioning Armenia's possible partnership to the regional projects after solving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Armenian leadership needs to make a decision between cooperation and conflict. It will shape the regional stability as well as the country's position because state power is declining in the age of cooperation. Otherwise too weak and aggressive states are pushed out of the system.

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