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A “Middle Power”’s Diplomacy to its Vicinity: Caucasus Projection of Türkiye’s Regional Ownership Vision and 3+3 Platform

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Abstract

One of the prominent actors in the international system in terms of various classifications of power is the ‘middle power’. Another important issue related to this concept is ‘middle power diplomacy’. Although it has different and sometimes opposing distinctive features, Türkiye possesses the qualities of both a ‘middle power’ and an actor conducting ‘middle power diplomacy’. An important phenomenon within Türkiye’s foreign policy instruments is the concept of ‘regional ownership’. For Ankara, the vision of regional ownership manifests itself through different foreign policy instruments for various regions. The aim of this study is to analyse the 3+3 Platform within the framework of Türkiye’s vision of regional ownership. In this context, the study analyses the characteristics of the concept of ‘regional ownership’ in the literature and seeks to determine the extent to which the 3+3 Platform meets these characteristics. Case analysis, one of the qualitative research methods, was employed in the study. Accordingly, the study analyses the information, documents and reports shared by the official authorities of the countries that are parties to the 3+3 Platform, as well as the discourses of the high-level officials of these actors.

Keywords: Türkiye, Middle Power, Regional Ownership, Caucasus, 3+3 Platform.

Bir “Orta Güç” Çevresine Yönelik Diplomasisi: Türkiye’nin Bölgesel Sahiplenme Vizyonunun Kafkasya İzdüşümü ve 3+3 Platformu

Öz

Uluslararası sistemde gücün çeşitli sınıflandırmaları açısından öne çıkan aktörlerden biri “orta güç”lerdir. Bu kavram ile ilişkili diğer önemli bir husus da “orta güç diplomasisi”dir. Farklı ve bazen de bir birine muhalif ayırt edici özellikleri olmasına rağmen, Türkiye hem “orta gücün” hem de “orta güç diplomasisini” yürüten aktörün niteliklerini barındırmaktadır. Türkiye’nin dış politika araçları içerisinde yer alan önemli bir fenomen ise “bölgesel sahiplenme” kavramıdır. Ankara açısından bölgesel sahiplenme vizyonu çeşitli bölgeler için

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farklı dış politika araçları ile kendini göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye'nin bölgesel sahiplenme vizyonu çerçevesinde 3+3 Platformu'nu incelemektir. Bu bağlamda çalışmada "bölgesel sahiplenme" kavramının literatürdeki özellikleri ele alınmakta ve 3+3 Platformu'nun bu özellikleri karşılama düzeyinin cevabı aranmaktadır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden vaka analizine başvurulmuştur. Bu doğrultuda çalışmada 3+3 Platformu'nun tarafı olan ülkelerin resmi makamları tarafından paylaşılan bilgi, belge ve raporların yanı sıra söz konusu aktörlerin üst düzey yetkililerinin söylemleri incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Orta Güç, Bölgesel Sahiplenme, Kafkasya, 3+3 Platformu.

Introduction

Simultaneously with the end of the Cold War, the bipolar world order also came to an end, and this environment of uncertainty brought about the global system's search for a new order. Kissinger (2014) attributes the basis of the crisis of world order to two important reasons, namely, 'the failure to understand the nature and scope of the challenge to the order itself and the failure to adapt to a major change in power relations. The factor of change in power relations is also referred to extensively by Kennedy (1988). In his study, Kennedy explains power transition and its consequences with dozens of examples of the reactions of states that have become middle or great powers in their region and the world in a few decades (Kennedy, 1988). This understanding, which is also embraced by neoclassical realists, reveals that relative power change can be parallel to actor behavior.

According to Friedberg (1996), the change in the material power capacity of actors imposes on them a mission to 'seek to change or even overthrow the status quo in order to create new systems more in line with their perceptions of their global position'. This situation is similar in terms of actors' attitudes towards developments in regional issues. In this context, the above arguments have the criteria that are essential for the questions sought to be answered in this study. Because the reaction of actors to the developments in their own regions cannot be handled independently of power. Another issue to be considered in this direction is the classification of power.

The categorization of power is of particular importance in both qualitative and quantitative terms. The qualitative distinction, which is identified with the use of military power in foreign policy, has led to the emergence of concepts such as ‘hard power’ and ‘soft power’ in the international relations literature (Nye, 2002). In time, one can even speak of the concept of ‘smart power’, which emerges from the harmonization of these two elements of power (Nye, 2009). This qualitative distinction also provides a basis for the quantitative categorization of power among states.

As for the qualitative classification of power, there are various characterizations ranging from hegemon to small power. However, quantitative concepts of power such as superpower, great power and middle power have gained an established place in the literature (Nossal 1999; Mearsheimer, 2001; Efstathopoulos, 2023). The concept of power that is important for this study is the idea of ‘middle power’. When the concept of middle power is considered together with the power shift of neoclassical realism, the reaction of an actor in this position to the developments in its environment becomes an important research element. In this context, this study examines Türkiye’s position and its reaction to the developments in the Caucasus in the light of the middle power conceptualization. Accordingly, Türkiye’s reaction to the developments in the Caucasus is analyzed within the framework of the vision of regional ownership. One of the most important reflections of this vision in the Caucasus is the 3+3 Platform. In this context, it is useful to examine the concept of middle power and its relevance to Türkiye in order to answer the aimed questions.

Türkiye as a “Middle Power Diplomacy” Country

Although ‘middle power’ is perceived as a modern term of international relations, it has a long history. Rudd (2007) argues that the concept was used even in 15th century Europe. The basic connotation of the initial meaning of the concept was ‘possess enough power and control to be independent without relying on assistance from others’ (Rudd, 2007). Towards the end of the 20th century, the

meaning of the concept emphasized a correlation between the size and acquisitiveness of states (Grieco, 1990). Until then, the definitions of ‘middle power’ had emphasized the capacities of actors rather than their capabilities. However, developments in the following century have confirmed the judgement that actors’ capacities are not directly proportional to their capabilities, with dozens of examples. In the 21st century, many extraordinary developments have demonstrated that ‘ordinary’ concepts are insufficient to describe current crises. In this context, the concept of ‘middle power’ has started to express new meanings in the shadow of current problems. Among these meanings, ‘middle power diplomacy’ is an important issue.

It is quite natural that a concept of ‘middle power’ based on both capacities and capabilities could include Türkiye. In fact, there are dozens of assessments in the literature that Türkiye is a ‘middle power’ and even beyond in terms of capacity and capabilities (Hale, 2000; Oran, 2001; Öniş, 2003; Jordaan, 2003; Winrow, 2005; Yalçın, 2012). Some studies have even gone a step further and emphasized Türkiye’s potential to become a regional hegemon (Erickson, 2004). However, one of the characteristics of Türkiye that most closely fits this definition is the diplomatic method and vision it has developed in recent years.

Spies (2016) categorizes ‘middle power diplomacy’ into two main categories: traditional and new. According to him, the most distinctive features of traditional ‘middle power diplomacy’ are its normative approach and the altruistic instinct of the implementing country to support official development assistance to economically challenged countries (Spies, 2016). In the last decade, Türkiye has been consistently implementing an ‘entrepreneurial and humanitarian foreign policy’ based on normative principles while maintaining its claim as ‘the most generous country in the world’ by providing the highest amount of human development assistance relative to its gross national product (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2024). This attitude of Ankara makes it one of the indispensable actors of the traditional ‘middle power diplomacy’.

According to Spies’ (2016) second classification, the “new middle power diplomacy”, an actor must possess two main characteristics to be defined as a middle power in the contemporary sense. The first is the ‘middle power’s’ capacity for multilateral diplomacy. Another requirement is the actor’s ability and willingness to mediate (Spies, 2016). The ‘Antalya Diplomacy Forum’ launched by Ankara in 2021, which has become a global Turkish brand in the light of objective evaluations, is an indicator of its competence in multilateral diplomacy. On the other hand, these forums, which are attended by almost one out of every five foreign ministers in the world, are also an indicator of effectiveness. As a matter of fact, the 3rd Antalya Diplomacy Forum, the last of which was held in 2024, hosted around 4700 participants from 148 countries of the world, including 19 heads of state and government, 52 foreign ministers and 57 high-level representatives of international organizations, demonstrating an example of a diplomacy feast (Antalya Diplomacy Forum, 2024).

On the other hand, Türkiye’s pioneering mediation efforts in the last decade have been highly appreciated not only at the state level but also by the highest officials at the UN (Hürriyet Daily News, 2022). Its role as a mediator in the prisoner swap between the US and Russia, the ‘The Black Sea Grain Initiative’ it pioneered with its balanced stance during the Russia-Ukraine War, and the Ankara Process, which includes the negotiations between Ethiopia and Somalia, are just a few of these (Daily Sabah, 2024; United Nations, 2022; Demirtaş, 2024). However, among these initiatives, which are important for this study and will be focused on, the 3+3 Platform, an initiative in the Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War, will be emphasized. Before analyzing this case, it is useful to examine Ankara’s vision of ‘regional ownership’, which is Ankara’s way of addressing the issue in question.

The Vision of Regional Ownership

Conceptually, ‘regional ownership’ implies a vision based on certain rules and methods. In fact, although it is not named in a terminological sense, almost all situations in which an actor reacts to developments in its region by organizing its

neighbors and directing them towards cooperation are an example of ‘regional ownership’. However, the concept owes its fame in the international relations literature to the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) launched in 2009. The main objective of this initiative, which envisages cooperation among the countries of Southeast Europe in various fields, has been to promote the integration of the region with Europe and Euro-Atlantic (RCC, 2024). It is worth noting that Türkiye is a member of the RCC and Ankara supports the Council politically and economically (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024). The concept of ‘regional ownership’, which was frequently raised in the context of the RCC, has since evolved towards a vision equipped with certain principles.

Trimçev (2009) argues that there are two necessary conditions for a solid vision of ‘regional ownership’. According to him, ‘first, there must be an institutional structure that serves as a forum for agenda adoption based on clear rules of interaction between countries. He defines this requirement as a ‘deliberative setting’ (Trimçev, 2009). Secondly, the countries of the region must be able to demonstrate the necessary political will to overcome obstacles in the face of unavoidable challenges. In connection with the second condition, it is worth underlining a very important need. This is the need for ‘the existence of one or more actors who can informally persuade regional actors’ (Trimçev, 2009). This principle-based vision of ‘regional ownership’ will be quite accurate in explaining the co-operation steps taken to resolve the ongoing problems in the Caucasus.

The fact that the vision of regional ownership has become one of the normative instruments of Turkish foreign policy is not a product of today, but it is not very old either. This assessment is not wrong considering that the established use of the concept in the international relations literature is less than a quarter of a century old. Starting in 2015, a few retired diplomats and senior bureaucrats brought the concept to the agenda, basically suggesting that regional countries should seek a solution mechanism among themselves rather than resorting to the patronage of extra-regional actors in solving regional problems (Akıncı, 2015). Similarly, in the

following years, the vision of ‘regional ownership’, which came to the fore again in the context of Türkiye’s relations with the Gulf countries, became almost synonymous with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement ‘We cannot leave our future at the mercy of others’ during his visit to Bahrain (Kalin, 2017). Today, one of the most important projections of this vision is undoubtedly the 3+3 Platform.

Search for Stability in the Caucasus

The Caucasus has maintained its notoriety as a region of contemporary conflict over the last three decades. With Armenia’s occupation of 20% of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territory in 1992-1993, the Karabakh conflict has become a bleeding wound of the region. Starting from the early years of the 21st century, both the states of the region and external actors with interests in the region have been searching for a solution to the issue. At the beginning of the third millennium, an attempt to establish a ‘Caucasus Stability Pact’ (CSP) was put on the agenda, but due to the conflict of interests among the states of the region, this issue did not find the support it deserved (Hürriyet, 2000). In 2008, the ‘Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform’ (CSCP) initiative, which was further developed by then Prime Minister Erdoğan, was partially embraced by the states of the region, but it failed to have the expected impact (Çelikpala, 2010). In the year following this initiative, Türkiye tried to pursue a policy of normalising its relations with Armenia, but the discomfort caused by this situation on the Azerbaijani side showed that the stability in the region is based on delicate balances.

The fact that the CSP failed to find sufficient support while it was still at the idea stage, and that its predecessor, the CSCP mechanism, failed to meet the expectations, pointed to a fact: Stabilization in the Caucasus would not be possible without the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Nevertheless, the operational skills gained by Türkiye through the initiatives turned into an important source of experience and know-how for the 3+3 Platform to emerge in the following years. When the issue of opening the borders within the scope of Türkiye’s normalization with Armenia came to the agenda, Azerbaijan’s declaration that the Turkish-

Armenian borders were closed after the occupation of Kalbajar and that it was dissatisfied with a normalization that would take place as long as Kalbajar was not liberated from occupation (Vəliyev, 2017) supports the above judgement. In this context, the establishment of the 3+3 Platform after the Karabakh issue was resolved within the legitimate boundaries of international law with the intensive support of Türkiye gains more meaning.

3+3 Platform

On 27 September 2020, the Second Karabakh War, which started with Baku's response to the offensive against Azerbaijan from Karabakh, which Armenia had occupied for nearly thirty years, within the scope of legitimate self-defense, ended with Azerbaijan's victory. With Türkiye's intensive military and diplomatic support, the Azerbaijani army retook its occupied territories, and the Caucasus, one of the current chronic conflicts, was thus resolved with the skill of 'coercive diplomacy'. Unfortunately, the resolution of the conflict in the Caucasus does not mean a complete cessation of the conflict climate in the region. This situation was acknowledged by political leaders, leading to initiatives in the post-Patriotic War period aimed at establishing sustainable regional peace and stability. The most accepted of these initiatives is undoubtedly the 3+3 Platform.

The first will for the establishment of the 3+3 Platform came to the agenda during President Erdoğan's visit to Azerbaijan with the state officials as part of the Baku Victory Parade organized after the Karabakh victory (Aslanlı, 2020). Within the scope of the visit in question, work was started immediately the following year for the cooperation initiative proposed by the leaders of the two countries. In this context, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who went on a tour of the Caucasus in the first month of 2021, made a statement in which he commented that wish is not enough to ensure stability in the region and that desire must be transformed into will, signaling that they are striving for a 3+3 format of cooperation in the South Caucasus (Hürriyet, 2021). At the end of the same year, on 10 December 2021, the first meeting of the 3+3 Platform was held in Moscow with the

participation of Türkiye, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia. At the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers, Ankara was represented by a delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Sedat Önal. The then Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani stated that he conveyed the reason for not attending to his interlocutors as ‘we said that our relations with the occupying country would be very difficult if we did not see a process of dismantling the occupation’ and that Georgia did not intend to participate in the 3+3 format together with the Russian Federation even months before the meeting (Civil Georgia, 2021). Undoubtedly, Tbilisi’s pro-Western stance also played a role in this attitude (Javakhishvili, 2022). On 10 December 2021, the official information about the content of the meeting held in Moscow was announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye with the following statements:

“A constructive exchange of views took place at the meeting about multidimensional progress in regional cooperation where it was agreed to focus on practical issues of common interest to all participants. Within the context of practical steps that can be taken for enhancing peace and stability through confidence building, it was foreseen to give priority to trade, economy, transport, culture and humanitarian issues. Representatives of the five participating countries agreed to adopt a flexible working format and expressed their hope that Georgia too will join the consultations in the future.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2021).

The first thing that draws attention about the first meeting of the 3+3 Platform may be the fact that the representation in the negotiations was at the level of deputy ministers. However, it should also be taken into consideration that this first meeting was also exploratory in nature. The developments in the following years also point to this situation. In this context, within the scope of the 3+3 Platform, the first meeting was held in Moscow and the second meeting was held in Tehran at the level of foreign ministers. On the other hand, Georgia did not participate in the second meeting of the 3+3 Platform hosted by Tehran, where the aim of expanding and strengthening confidence and co-operation in the region was reaffirmed.

Nevertheless, the parties once again emphasized that the Platform is open for Georgia's equal participation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2023). In fact, the day before the Tehran session of the 3+3 Platform, Georgia declared that it would not participate in the meeting, stating in a press release issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that 'Georgia does not participate in this meeting and has never participated (in this format)' (Civil Georgia, 2023). It was also agreed at the Tehran meeting that the next summit would be held in Istanbul. Accordingly, the most recent meeting of the 3+3 Platform was held in Istanbul in 2024.

The third meeting of the 3+3 Platform, held in Istanbul on 18 October 2024, discussed 'issues related to the establishment of lasting peace and stability and regional development and deepening regional cooperation through concrete projects. At the end of the meeting, a Joint Declaration was issued, and the Participating Foreign Ministers were received by President Erdoğan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024b). The 13-point Joint Declaration reaffirmed the points agreed at previous meetings and reiterated that the Platform will always be open to Georgia's participation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024c).

When the meetings and content of the 3+3 Platform are analyzed in the light of the above developments, it is seen that the format corresponds to the principles of the vision of 'regional ownership'. It was mentioned above that Trimçev (2009) formulated the first condition for 'regional ownership' as 'the existence of an institutional structure serving as a forum'. In this respect, it can be said that the 3+3 Platform, which has held three meetings, fulfils the first condition of this concept. The meetings of the 3+3 Platform, which took place in Moscow, Tehran and Istanbul respectively, fully fulfil the 'deliberative setting' described by Trimçev.

Secondly, Trimçev (2009), again as mentioned above, considers that regional ownership requires 'the presence of one or more actors who can informally convince the actors in the region'. In this sense, the countries in the region, including Iran, where Türkiye and Russia have taken the initiative, stand out as actors that fulfil

these conditions. On the other hand, in a statement by Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, the policy implemented regarding the situation in the Caucasus is associated with the concept as follows:

“There is a concept that Türkiye has developed and underlined in recent years: The concept of regional ownership. We consider this 3+3 Platform in the Caucasus, together with other regional initiatives, within this framework. Regional ownership is important. I spend part of my diplomatic time in the region explaining this, whether I go to the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Africa or Central Asia. It is important for this: Do not wait for a hegemon, come together on your own. Let us, the countries of the region, the nations of the region, take matters into our own hands, and deal with our own problems as much as we can, in a genuine way. And when we need help from outside, let us ask for it in a qualified manner. When you don’t... The hegemon comes and doesn’t care what you need...” (Haber Global, 2024).

Foreign Minister Fidan’s comment is an important complement to make sense of the situation. Based on both the two basic conditions of the vision of regional ownership and the way Foreign Minister Fidan positions foreign policy instruments, it is seen that the 3+3 Platform highly corresponds to the concept of ‘regional ownership’.

Conclusion

Considering Türkiye’s material power capacity in the 21st century and its role in the international community, it is seen that Türkiye corresponds to the concept of ‘middle power’ in the power classification. In addition, considering its capacities and capabilities, it can be said that its foreign policy corresponds to a middle power diplomacy in terms of its instruments. The important outcomes of this situation are largely reflected in regional developments. In recent years, Ankara’s successful foreign policy in line with its national interests in different regions is also in harmony with the characteristics of a concept that has an important counterpart in the international relations literature, ‘regional ownership’.

In the light of the above-mentioned developments, it can be considered a very valid judgement that the way the 3+3 Platform is conducted, and its content is a projection of a vision of ‘regional ownership’. As a foreign policy tool used by a ‘middle power’ as a diplomatic reaction to its immediate neighborhood, the three meetings of the Platform are also an important consultation mechanism. On the other hand, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan’s interpretation of the 3+3 Platform directly in the light of the concept of ‘regional ownership’ gives a comprehensive idea about Ankara’s approach to the issue.

However, although the name of the mechanism has become famous as the 3+3 Platform, the fact that Georgia, one of the first three countries in the equation, has not yet participated in any of the three meetings results in a 3+2 format. Nevertheless, the declaration signed at the end of all three meetings shows above that the parties insisted on Georgia’s participation. From all these points of view, it is a pleasing development for the region that the 3+3 Platform stands out as the final embodiment of the search for a consultation and cooperation mechanism in the Caucasus in 2000 and 2008 respectively. On the other hand, the fact that Türkiye is seen as one of the locomotives of this mechanism should be evaluated in the light of both the success of ‘middle power diplomacy’ and the effects of the vision of ‘regional ownership’. In the light of the experience gained from pioneering initiatives such as CSP and CSCP, Ankara has realized that for a sustainable consultation mechanism in the Caucasus, the Karabakh issue, which is the chronic problem of the region, must be resolved and has directed the developments in this direction.

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