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Peace and Stability in the South Caucasus: Security Agreements and Conflict Resolutions Between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia (2003-2023)

Abstract

The main focus of this article is to analyze the conflicts in the South Caucasus and explore possible solutions. The article is based on the historical period from 2003 to 2023. The Southern Caucasus is a region with an ancient history, inhabited by multi-ethnic peoples and the centre of complex political and economic processes. In the South Caucasus, a region historically marked by numerous conflict centers, maintaining peace and stability, and finding ways to resolve conflicts, is of great importance. Ensuring peace and security in the South Caucasus is one of the most important research topics of the modern era. It is essential to study Azerbaijan's role in maintaining peace in this region and its influence on relations between Turkey and Russia in the South Caucasus. Turkey's presence in the region was an important step in the brotherhood and cooperation and relations with Azerbaijan, as well as in the context of peace control in Karabakh. Russia is a historical participant of the South Caucasus region. For 30 years, Azerbaijan has taken significant steps toward conflict resolution through negotiations. However, Armenia's actions against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan have confirmed the impossibility of achieving a peaceful solution to this conflict. The conflict concluded with Azerbaijan exercising its rights under



<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/atdd>

international law principles and liberating its occupied territories. The Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories, which caused significant harm to peace and security in the South Caucasus, ended in 2020 as a result of successful operations by the Azerbaijani army. Armenia's agreement to Azerbaijan's conditions and the signing of a peace treaty will be a key step toward maintaining peace and security in the South Caucasus region in the future.

Keywords: *Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Turkey, Russian Federation, South Caucasus, peace and stability*

Güney Kafkasya'da Barış ve İstikrar: Azerbaycan, Türkiye ve Rusya Arasındaki Güvenlik Anlaşmaları ve Çatışma Çözümleri (2003-2023)

Öz

Bu makalenin ana odak noktası Güney Kafkasya'daki çatışmaları analiz etmek ve olası çözümleri araştırmaktır. Makale 2003'ten 2023'e kadar olan tarihsel dönemi temel almaktadır. Güney Kafkasya kadim bir tarihe sahip, çok etnikli halkların yaşadığı ve karmaşık siyasi ve ekonomik süreçlerin merkezi olan bir bölgedir. Tarihsel olarak çok sayıda çatışma merkezinin bulunduğu bir bölge olan Güney Kafkasya'da barış ve istikrarın korunması ve çatışmaların çözüm yollarının bulunması büyük önem taşımaktadır. Güney Kafkasya'da barış ve güvenliğin sağlanması modern çağın en önemli araştırma konularından biridir. Azerbaycan'ın bu bölgede barışın sağlanmasındaki rolünü ve Güney Kafkasya'da Türkiye ve Rusya arasındaki ilişkiler üzerindeki etkisini incelemek çok önemlidir. Türkiye'nin bölgedeki varlığı, Azerbaycan ile kardeşlik, işbirliği ve ilişkilerin yanı sıra Karabağ'da barışın kontrolü bağlamında da önemli bir adım olmuştur. Rusya, Güney Kafkasya bölgesinin tarihi bir katılımcısıdır. Azerbaycan, 30 yıl boyunca müzakereler yoluyla çatışmanın çözümüne yönelik önemli adımlar atmıştır. Ancak Ermenistan'ın Azerbaycan'ın toprak bütünlüğü ve egemenliğine karşı eylemleri, bu çatışmaya barışçıl bir çözüm bulunmasının imkansızlığını teyit etmiştir. Çatışma, Azerbaycan'ın uluslararası hukuk ilkeleri çerçevesinde haklarını kullanması ve işgal altındaki topraklarını kurtarmasıyla sonuçlanmıştır. Güney Kafkasya'da barış ve güvenliğe önemli ölçüde zarar veren Azerbaycan topraklarındaki Ermeni işgali, Azerbaycan ordusunun başarılı operasyonları sonucunda 2020 yılında sona ermiştir. Ermenistan'ın Azerbaycan'ın şartlarını kabul etmesi ve barış anlaşmasının imzalanması, gelecekte Güney Kafkasya bölgesinde barış ve güvenliğin sağlanması için önemli bir adım olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, Rusya Federasyonu, Güney Kafkasya, barış ve istikrar*

Introduction

The South Caucasus is a region with an ancient history, inhabited by multi-ethnic peoples and serving as the center of complex political and economic processes. In this region, which has

been characterized by numerous conflict centers throughout history, maintaining peace and stability and finding ways to resolve conflicts is of great importance. The Republic of Azerbaijan plays a significant role in the region, leading other countries in economic, political, and other aspects. For this reason, Azerbaijan has become one of the countries that take fundamental steps toward the constant protection of peace and stability in the South Caucasus. Historically, politically, and economically, the South Caucasus region has been influenced by various actors, including the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation. Throughout history, Russia has consistently sought to maintain its voice and influence in this region by actively engaging in the conflicts and processes occurring in the South Caucasus. After the collapse of the USSR, Turkey began to assert its political position in the region's developments. Its historical and national ties with Azerbaijan have positively impacted its standing, transforming Turkey into a significant player in the region.

Bilateral and tripartite negotiations between these countries have played a crucial role in restoring peace and stability in the region. The foreign policy and position of Ilham Aliyev, who was elected President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2003, indicated that Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey would develop positively. Ilham Aliyev's statement, "Wherever Turkey is, Azerbaijan is there," helps define the future diplomatic and political direction of their relationship (Veliev, 2022). To a certain extent, Turkey's goals in the South Caucasus can be ranked as follows: ensuring good relations with Georgia, and fostering fraternity, friendship, and strategic cooperation with Azerbaijan in all possible fields. This cooperation aims to meet Turkey's long-term energy needs and to facilitate the transit of Central Asian oil and natural gas, especially from the Caspian Sea, through Turkey to the West under the most favorable conditions. Due to its geographical position, Turkey can serve as a bridge for the export of natural resources from the Caspian Sea to the European market.

In addition to its strategic importance, the South Caucasus is a vital region due to its rich natural resources, including natural gas and oil. This region is located at the intersection of transportation and energy corridors in Eurasia. Given the wealth of natural resources in the region, it is evident how significant its trade potential is. Therefore, ensuring peace and security in the South Caucasus is crucial not only for the countries within the region but also for the entire world, particularly as a conduit to the European market.

In general, Russia's perspective on the conflicts in the South Caucasus has been different. The processes surrounding the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (which is still ongoing), the Georgian-

Ossetian conflict (also ongoing), and the Karabakh conflict, which concluded with Azerbaijan's rightful victory, have followed distinct diplomatic approaches from Russia. While the situations in Abkhazia and Ossetia share similarities, the Karabakh issue is different from the other two. Although Russia has not directly intervened in the Karabakh conflict, it has actively engaged in the matters of Abkhazia and Ossetia. If Russia played a balancing role in the Karabakh issue, it is directly involved as a party to the conflicts in the other two regions. The escalation of conflicts in Georgia was driven by various internal processes. Mikheil Saakashvili, who came to power through the "Rose Revolution," aimed to establish a central government to counter separatist movements and expressed this intent consistently. He announced that he would address the issues in the separatist regions as soon as he took office. Additionally, he began reforming the military in cooperation with the United States and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). However, he was unable to prevent ethnic conflicts and the Ossetians' desire for independence. Saakashvili deployed his troops to South Ossetia under the "Protection of Constitutional Order" operation, believing he would gain support from the U.S. and the West (Elmas, 2018). When analyzing the role of the Russian state in ensuring peace in the South Caucasus, several factors must be considered. It is difficult to envision resolving the problems left by the Soviet Union without Russia's involvement. Consequently, Russia's influence and role in the conflicts in Abkhazia and Ossetia in Georgia, as well as the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, cannot be overlooked. With Russia's direct involvement in the South Ossetia-Georgia war in 2008, the course of the conflict changed, leading to significant military and political successes for Russia. Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 can be seen as a warning to the West prior to the 2008 intervention. In this speech, Putin stated that they would not allow NATO's attempts to expand eastward into former Soviet territories, that a unipolar world no longer exists, and that the security guarantees provided to Russia have not been fulfilled. He declared that a new world model, in which one power dominates, is unacceptable and impossible in today's context (Vladimir, 2007). Turkey's foreign policy regarding Georgia and its perspective on the conflicts have differed. The conflict that occurred in 2008 raised significant concerns for Turkey. Turkey faced pressure to deny passage to U.S. ships seeking to bring humanitarian aid to Georgia under the Montreux Straits Convention, placing Turkey in a difficult position between the United States and Russia. Russia demanded that Turkey prevent U.S. ships from passing through the straits, insisting that all actions align with the convention. The United States requested a revision of the

Montreux Convention's provisions for NATO countries. However, Turkey pursued a pragmatic policy that considered its own interests and managed the situation calmly without addressing the issue of the straits (Elmas, 2018). Russia has played a role as a participant in every event concerning bilateral relations with regional states and the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh issue, including its involvement in the Minsk Group established under the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). In the Karabakh conflict, Russia implemented a balancing policy and did not openly support either side. If it had openly favored one side, this balanced approach would have been disrupted, damaging the image of "fraternity" between the parties. Russia's primary goal was to ensure that regional problems were resolved according to its interests, without the involvement of any foreign forces in the South Caucasus, which it perceives as its sphere of influence. Although Russia made statements advocating for a resolution to the conflict, it was not genuinely eager to achieve one; rather, it acted in favor of maintaining the status quo. At the level of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, officials repeatedly expressed that assisting Russia in arming Armenia would be detrimental to peace and security in the region. Although Russia denied these allegations, incidents that hindered the search for solutions continued to occur. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs even stated, referencing a note from the Azerbaijan MFA (No. 5/10-080/04/09 dated January 15, 2009), that Russia did not sell military weapons and equipment to Armenia (Azerbaijan State Information Agency, 2024). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 94 percent of Armenia's arms imports from 2016 to 2020 came from Russia (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021). Among the weapons imported from Russia are SU-30 fighter jets, the Iskander ballistic missile system, and the TOR and S-300 air defense systems (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021). In 2010, during visits to Russia by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, discussions were held regarding the resolution of the Karabakh problem, and efforts were made to find solutions to the conflict (Səs newspaper, 2010). In his meeting with Vladimir Putin that same year, Erdogan emphasized the need to eliminate the occupation of Azerbaijani lands and highlighted the significant role of the Minsk Group in neighboring countries, urging them to fulfill their responsibilities. The main focus of many negotiations conducted in Moscow was to ensure Azerbaijan's national interests. It was stated that this approach was essential for restoring political relations and addressing border issues with Armenia; otherwise, no matters related to Yerevan would be viewed positively. In 2012, a meeting was held between the foreign ministers of Turkey and Russia, Ahmet Davutoğlu and Sergey Lavrov, during which they discussed the resolution of

the Karabakh problem. Both ministers expressed that it was unacceptable to maintain the current status quo. In 2016, a four-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia was halted through Russia's diplomatic intervention. With Russia's efforts, agreements were reached between the chiefs of staff of Azerbaijan and Armenia on this issue in Moscow. The most significant proposal regarding the resolution of the Karabakh problem came from Lavrov, who presented a plan based on the Madrid principles. The 2019 solution plan closely resembled previous ideas about the conflict. Lavrov proposed that, in the first stage, the Armenian army withdraw its troops from the occupied territories, return to lands inhabited by Azerbaijanis, ensure security, and maintain communication. Notably, Lavrov's plan did not address the status of Karabakh.

For 30 years, Azerbaijan took all possible steps to resolve the Karabakh conflict peacefully. Despite having no legal basis, Azerbaijani lands were unjustly occupied by Armenia for many years, resulting in the exile of millions of Azerbaijanis from their homeland. Villages inhabited by Azerbaijanis were raided, people were killed, and settlements were rendered uninhabitable. After the collapse of the USSR, the Karabakh issue between Azerbaijan and Armenia remained unresolved for a long time. Consequently, armed conflicts erupted between them in 2008, 2010, 2016, and 2018. During this period, the Armenian side not only failed to take steps toward returning the occupied lands but also posed a threat to Azerbaijan's borders by launching new attacks. According to principles of state sovereignty, each state has authority over its own territory while respecting the territorial integrity of other states. Any violation of this principle constitutes an unlawful use of force and prohibited intrusion. In legal systems worldwide, the attacked party has the right to defend itself. A logical perspective supports the notion that if any party is attacked, it may use force in self-defense if necessary. In international law, it is acknowledged that attacked states have the right to self-defense when force is employed against them. Article 51 of the UN Charter specifies that the right to self-defense includes both individual and collective defense. The phrase "when someone is subjected to an armed attack," as mentioned in Article 51, indicates that an armed attack must occur for the right to self-defense to be justified. The events of September 2020 led to Armenia's violation of Azerbaijan's borders and prompted Azerbaijan to initiate a counter-offensive operation to restore its territorial integrity. Undoubtedly, the restoration of peace and security in the region has been a long-standing effort. As a result of the policies implemented by the Armenian side, Azerbaijan adopted a stricter diplomatic position. Turkey declared its support for Azerbaijan from the first day of the conflict, providing moral and diplomatic backing

throughout the resolution process as a regional power. During the conflicts, Russia indicated that the war did not occur on Armenian territory and signaled its desire to remain uninvolved in the process. Although Turkish-Russian relations diverged in other contexts, such as Libya and Syria, their cooperation in the South Caucasus represented a significant gain for Russia. On September 28, 2020, the second day of the war, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan clearly articulated Turkey's position. He stated that the crisis in the region should be resolved and that peace would return only after the occupied Azerbaijani lands were liberated. Erdogan also emphasized that the United States, Russia, and France the so-called "Minsk trio" had failed to resolve the issue, openly expressing Turkey's support for Azerbaijan and its pursuit of a solution. As of October 2, 2020, 19 civilians, including children, women, and the elderly, were killed, and 55 others were injured as a result of artillery attacks by the Armenian army. In the following days, from October 4 to 6, 32 more individuals, including children, women, and the elderly, were injured, and one person was killed in attacks on Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city, which is located at least 100 km from the front line.

During the Second Karabakh War, these attacks by the Armenian army on civilian settlements located outside the front line violated the main conventions of international humanitarian law. These conventions govern armed conflicts, with the first principle outlined in the Hague Conventions and the second principle established by the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols. It is crucial to adhere to these rules (Henckaerts & Doswald-Beck, 2005). Reports indicated that Armenia employed prohibited military munitions in its attacks against civilian areas. Throughout the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia violated numerous provisions of human rights law. As a result of these actions, the responsibility for violating the right to life lies with Armenia. The targeting of civilian objects led to the deaths of over a hundred civilians and damage to hospitals, mosques, and other structures. For these reasons, the delegation of the Human Rights Commission has called for the leaders who led Armenia into war to be tried at the International Criminal Court. Additionally, the Council of Europe should address the issue of human rights violations, the UN should investigate potential war crimes, and the UN Security Council should take appropriate action.

The government and people of the Republic of Turkey expressed their full support for Azerbaijan due to their historical closeness and shared political approaches. Before the war, military exercises were conducted between Turkish and Azerbaijani soldiers. Large-scale military drills took place in various regions of Azerbaijan, including the Nakhchivan region. Additionally,

the Azerbaijani side purchased UAVs produced by Turkey both before and during the war, effectively utilizing them on the battlefield. These weapons significantly contributed to Azerbaijan's victory.

During the Karabakh war, support came not only from the Azerbaijani government but also from the Turkish nation. Following Armenia's attack on Azerbaijan, Hakan Çavuşoğlu, the Chairman of the Human Rights Research Commission, along with MPs from Diyarbakir, Mush, Istanbul, and other cities, visited Azerbaijan to investigate the conflicts and human rights violations in the region. Turkey's direct involvement in this process was a crucial step toward ensuring a balance of power, maintaining the position and influence of the Azerbaijani state, and preventing potential provocations by Armenia in the future. This involvement also played an essential role in deterring any actions by Russia against Azerbaijan's sovereignty.

It is noteworthy that the resolute suppression of Armenia's aggressive and provocative actions against Azerbaijan has raised concerns among many pro-Armenian states worldwide. Numerous European political leaders, influenced by the Armenian lobby, made regrettable statements that were incompatible with their countries' interests. Although they aimed to preserve their political power and demonstrate Christian solidarity through such actions, they effectively acted against the national interests of their states and peoples, as well as international legal norms.

However, the absence of a strong reaction from any state to Azerbaijan's efforts to ensure its internationally recognized territorial integrity, along with the subsequent retraction of regrettable statements, can be viewed as a diplomatic success for Azerbaijan. The ceasefire agreement included provisions for the Republic of Armenia to return Kalbajar by November 15, 2020, and Lachin by December 1, 2020. Additionally, unblocking all transport and economic relations in the region was one of the key clauses in the ceasefire. Armenia was required to facilitate transport connections between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, with transport control to be managed by the Border Service of the Russian Federation.

The Vice President of the Republic of Turkey, Fuat Oktay, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, and Parliament Speaker Mustafa Şentop congratulated Azerbaijan on its achievements. One of the most significant steps toward ensuring peace and security in the South Caucasus region was taken on November 9, 2020, with the declaration of the Karabakh ceasefire. This ceasefire laid important groundwork for the potential signing of a peace treaty in the future. The main clauses of the statement provided for a cessation of hostilities beginning November 9 and outlined specific

dates for Armenia's withdrawal from Azerbaijani lands. Furthermore, a clause was included declaring a complete ceasefire and the cessation of all hostilities in the Karabakh conflict region from 00:00 Moscow time on November 10, 2020. According to the agreement, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia would maintain their positions.

In 2023, the final year of the research, Azerbaijan launched an anti-terrorist operation aimed at disarming illegal Armenian armed groups in Karabakh, removing them from the region, neutralizing their military infrastructure, ensuring the safety of the civilian population, and restoring constitutional order. The operation, which employed high-precision weapons to neutralize the positions and firing points of the Armenian forces, lasted approximately 24 hours. As a result, the illegal Armenian armed forces were compelled to lay down their arms, leading to the dissolution of the so-called Armenian administration that had established the occupation regime in Karabakh. The cities of Khojavend, Khojaly, and Aghdara, previously regarded as the "capital" by the occupying regime, came under Azerbaijani control, fully restoring sovereignty and constitutional order throughout the country. Former members of the so-called Armenian administration in Karabakh were detained by Azerbaijani security forces and transported to Baku for investigation. Tragically, the anti-terrorist operation resulted in the martyrdom of 204 Azerbaijani soldiers, and various weapons and military equipment belonging to the Armenian armed forces were seized during the operation.

Conclusion

The occupation of Azerbaijani lands by Armenia, which inflicted significant damage to peace and security in the South Caucasus, ended in 2020 due to the successful operations of the Azerbaijani army. The ceasefire signed on November 9, 2020, marked a fundamental step toward establishing security and peace in the region while creating conditions for a future peace agreement. Turkey and Russia held individual positions and obligations regarding this ceasefire, and the Russia-Turkey Joint Monitoring Center in Karabakh began operations on January 30, 2021. Turkey's presence in the region was particularly important for fostering brotherhood, cooperation, and relations with Azerbaijan, as well as for peacekeeping in Karabakh.

For 30 years, Armenia disregarded Azerbaijan's attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully and threatened its territorial integrity through disruptive activities, ultimately becoming the cause of the war. Both Russia and Turkey acknowledged Azerbaijan's right to act under international law. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs repeatedly stated that military operations were occurring on Azerbaijan's own territory, which prevented any military intervention by Russia. Azerbaijan did

not commit any war crimes while restoring its territorial integrity during the war. It did not harm any civilian population or civilian residential area. Despite this, Armenia carried out military strikes on civilian residential areas in Azerbaijan, causing the deaths of civilians. Hundreds of civilians were killed and injured as a result of Armenian attacks during the Second Karabakh War. Among the deceased were children, women, and the elderly. Armenia committed a war crime and those who caused it will be judged under international law.

The research emphasized Azerbaijan's undeniable role in ensuring peace and security in the South Caucasus and its support for living in peace and establishing economic and diplomatic relations with other countries in the region. Azerbaijan is a leader in energy production in the South Caucasus region. For many years, significant work has been done between Georgia and Azerbaijan to deliver these energy products to Europe and the world, which has had a positive impact on the economies of both countries. If Armenia respects peace and security in the region, joining trade relations in the region will be beneficial to its economy. In particular, the opening of the Zangilan corridor will be an important event for all countries in the region, both in terms of energy product trade and international logistics. The Zangilan corridor will make a massive contribution to the easier integration of the South Caucasus countries into Europe and the world through Turkey. Considering all these conditions, it can be noted that the resolution of the Karabakh problem, securing the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and eliminating terrorist threats in the region have become the greatest guarantee of peace and security in the South Caucasus region.

The success achieved by Azerbaijan serves as a testament to the effective policies of the Azerbaijani army and the leadership of President and Commander-in-Chief Ilham Aliyev. A peace agreement that may be signed with Armenia in the future, based on the ceasefire, will serve as a guarantee of peace and security in the South Caucasus region. Taking all this situation, it can be concluded that building Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan on solid foundations is of great importance for its future prospects in the region. The signing of a peace treaty will play a key role in preventing possible armed and diplomatic conflicts in the region.

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