



Strategic Performance and Complementarity: A Substantiveness Analysis of Turkey-Azerbaijan- Georgia Trilateral Cooperation

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Abstract: This article is an analytical assessment of the trilateral relationship between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (TAG) and seeks to account for the substantiveness of their cooperation. Using a heuristic analytical framework, it considers the role of the trilateral relationship in the foreign policies of each of the three countries and its concomitant institutional “thickness” as a mechanism for security governance, to assess TAG cooperation. Based on the analysis, the article finds that trilateral cooperation between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia can be considered substantial and indicative of alignment. However, the overarching and durable rationale for this alignment is not immediately clear. While solving the puzzle of trilateral alignment is beyond the scope of this study, the conclusion posits that TAG cooperation may be an extension of complementary strategic priorities and increasingly aligned regime types.

Keywords: Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Black Sea, democracy, autocracy, security governance.

Introduction

The states that abut the Black Sea littoral and their immediate hinterlands (hereinafter, the Black Sea region)¹ are commonly considered in international rela-

¹ Here, we do not strictly define the Black Sea region as comprising only those states with a Black Sea coastline (“littoral”), but also include nearby states (“immediate hinterland”) with invariable ties to, or dependence on, the Black Sea as a region, such as the non-littoral states of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Moldova.

tions literature and policy analysis in terms of their relationships to external powers or alliance systems, rather than as part of a differentiated regional unit of their own.² This is not necessarily an unreasonable analytical position, given that the states considered part of the “greater” Black Sea region are indeed functionally divided into varying and, in some cases, competing alliance systems and transnational groupings: the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), to name the most prominent of these.³ These organizations’ overlapping jurisdictions are mediated, at least to some degree, by the Black Sea’s geographic position as a borderland gradient between the socio-geographical constructs of “East” and “West,” and between Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East, and Asia. Accordingly, alliance systems have generally cleaved along these jagged geographies, with less attention paid to structural alignments endogenous to the Black Sea region itself.

The same dynamics that discourage a focus on “internal” Black Sea regional alignments also undermine internalized regional cooperation. The Black Sea region, understood internationally as a transitional zone of sorts, resists functional differentiation when its states and polities coexist within varying and competing political and even “civilizational” systems. Manoli, in particular, considers this question in detail, noting that some twenty years of regionalism in the Black Sea have produced many interstate agreements and quasi-institutional platforms—some of impressive scale and ambition—but much less in the way of tangible interstate connectivity.⁴ Vladova and Knieling have reached similar conclusions: despite a surfeit of common issues that might otherwise bind the Black Sea states, a transitional construct tends to dominate perceptions and characterizations of the region, both externally and internally.⁵

² See, for example, Sergii Glebov, “Black Sea Security as a Regional Concern for the Black Sea States and the Global Powers,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 351-365, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850902934341>; F. Stephen Larrabee, “The United States and Security in the Black Sea Region,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 301-315, <http://doi.org/10.1080/14683850902934309>; and Fabrizio Tassinari, “A Synergy for Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Guidelines for an EU Initiative,” CEPS Policy Brief No. 105, Centre for European Policy Studies, June 2006, www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/synergy-black-sea-regional-cooperation-guidelines-eu-initiative/.

³ Although Russia is the leading power in the CSTO and EAEU, and is evidently a Black Sea power, neither of these organizations is focused on the Black Sea region. Moreover, as a global power with broad geographical ambitions, Russian foreign policy is not solely or even primarily focused on the Black Sea region. This contrasts with regional powers such as Turkey, for whom the Black Sea is of more immediate concern.

⁴ Panagiota Manoli, *The Dynamics of Black Sea Subregionalism* (London: Routledge, 2012, eBook Published 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315615738>.

⁵ Galya Vladova and Jörg Knieling, “Potential and Challenges for the Black Sea Regional Cooperation,” *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 39-66, https://ejes.uaic.ro/articles/EJES2014_0501_VLA.pdf.

The abundance of organizations that failed to meet initial expectations makes relative success in the region all the more notable. In that vein, the sub-regional trilateral relationship between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (TAG) is worth particular exploration. Formally inaugurated in 2012, TAG trilateral cooperation has not only survived in the years since but has also appreciably expanded in both the breadth and substance of its activities. TAG trilateral cooperation promotes policy interconnectivity between the three states, as mediated by the platform launched with the 2012 Trabzon Declaration.

Although TAG trilateral cooperation is featured in the regional literature to some extent, most treatments have considered the phenomenon without testing or otherwise seeking to assess its substantiveness. Valiyev, for example, highlights TAG trilateral cooperation as a pillar of Azerbaijani foreign policy.⁶ Gurbanov charts the emergence of a security-military dimension within the TAG trilateral format.⁷ Köstem refers to the trilateral format—and particularly the TAG format—as a major element of Turkish foreign policy,⁸ while Cecire traces the emergence of TAG trilateral cooperation as an outgrowth of bilateral Azerbaijani-Turkish relations.⁹

TAG trilateral cooperation is treated as an extant, substantial phenomenon in the literature for several reasons. First, it is considered substantial according to the analytical judgment of the respective scholars. Second, and more notably, TAG trilateral cooperation is deemed substantial because the national leaderships of the respective states appear to regard it as such; the institutionalized TAG trilateral format regularly involves the heads of state, heads of government, and various other senior-level officials meeting on a regular basis. In this sense, TAG trilateral cooperation passes the “eye test” of notable foreign policy phenomena — it is important because member governments perceive it to be (or, at least, are perceived as perceiving it as such).

This article seeks to fill that gap in the literature by assessing the substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation using a heuristic analytical framework—i.e., a simplified, practical approach used to guide analysis by focusing on key ele-

⁶ Javid Valiyev, “Foreign Policy of Azerbaijan in 25 Years of Independence: Priorities, Principles and Achievements,” *Caucasus International* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 29-46.

⁷ Ilgar Gurbanov, “Azerbaijan’s Trilateral and Bilateral Military Cooperation with Turkey and Georgia: Important for Azerbaijan’s Security Calculations,” in *Panorama of Global Security Environment: The Central European Perspective – 2017-2018*, ed. Róbert Ondrejcsák et al. (Bratislava, Slovakia: Stratpol, 2018), 251-269, www.academia.edu/40151655/.

⁸ Seçkin Köstem, “Geopolitics, Identity and Beyond: Turkey’s Renewed Interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia,” in *Turkey’s Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*, ed. Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem (London: Routledge, 2019), 111, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429023064>.

⁹ Michael H. Cecire, “The Bilateral Origins of South Caucasus Trilateralism,” in *Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations: One Nation—Two States?* ed. Murad Ismayilov and Norman A. Graham (Routledge, 2016), 84-99, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315625119-4>.

ments—based on a revised adaptation of existing analytical frameworks for institutional thickness as proposed by Amin and Thrift.¹⁰ As theorized by Amin and Thrift, institutional thickness refers to the presence and interconnectedness of institutions within a particular region that contribute to its development. It highlights the density, interactions, and shared norms among various organizations—such as firms, government agencies, educational bodies, and other institutions—within a region. The concept emphasizes four key elements: (1) *Presence of many institutions*: a strong institutional landscape with various organizations; (2) *High levels of interaction*: cooperation and networking between these institutions; (3) *Shared norms and values*: institutions operate with common understandings and goals; and (4) *A collective sense of purpose*: a shared vision for regional development. Together, these factors create a supportive environment that fosters innovation, collaboration, and resilience.

Substantiveness is assessed by first considering the background and characteristics of TAG trilateral cooperation, its role in the foreign policies of the respective states, and applying an analytical framework that evaluates the “thickness” of TAG trilateral cooperation along five dimensions of functionality: (1) institutionalization; (2) breadth; (3) perceived importance; (4) durability; and (5) depth.

For the purposes of empirical completeness, this assessment reflects an analysis of evidence between the 2012 Trabzon Declaration and 2020. It finds that TAG cooperation is indeed “highly substantive.” The article concludes with notes on TAG trilateral cooperation, the implications of substantiveness, and the potential for further study of the phenomenon.

While this article seeks to explore the substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation, it takes no position—analytical or otherwise—on its long-term efficacy or future development. For example, while the three countries have arguably seen shifting foreign policies since 2020, and particularly since the launch of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this article does not engage with these shifts.¹¹ Relatedly, it also does not address the puzzle of the continued growth of TAG trilateral cooperation despite the relative paucity of successful endogenous multilateral initiatives and despite the otherwise seemingly divergent foreign policies of the three states.

Background of TAG Trilateral Cooperation

In June 2012, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (TAG) convened in the Turkish Black Sea city of Trabzon, where they officiated the launch

¹⁰ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Globalization, Institutions, and Regional Development in Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1995; online edn, Oxford Academic, October 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198289166.001.0001>.

¹¹ That said, the three states arguably have, if anything, an increasingly complementary outlook since 2020, given their budding individual ties with Moscow and shared autocratic regime types. However, a fuller discussion of those realignments is outside the scope of this article.

of a common trilateral platform for mutual cooperation and development. The so-called Trabzon Declaration emphasized the common economic, security, and foreign policy interests of the three states, along with their intentions to cooperate in the service of regional stability and the reduction of impediments. Notably, the Trabzon Declaration referred to a variety of preexisting linkages that preceded the 2012 meeting, positioning it as a kind of codification of already existing relationships and as a platform for their natural expansion. While most of the Declaration focused on economic connectivity and political cooperation, it highlighted security as the foremost priority of the platform, with its subsequent activities and emphases demonstrating TAG trilateral cooperation as a kind of security governance mechanism.

The preceding phase of TAG trilateral cooperation—an “informal” period—primarily, though not exclusively, encompassed the development of extensive shared energy infrastructure among the three states. The completion of both the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the parallel gas-carrying Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum “South Caucasus Pipeline”—both commissioned in 2006—represented considerable cooperation and coordination between the three states. These projects were not only strategic infrastructure undertakings but also means of connecting with and marketing to international energy markets. While energy was the most active sphere of trilateral cooperation, it was not the only one. As an adjunct to the energy corridor projects, the three states launched a joint effort in 2007 to develop the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, with the stated goal of providing a common linkage for freight and passenger traffic that could serve as an alternative route connecting Europe to the Eurasian interior and, from there, to Asia.

Although the BTK project predated the emergence or prominence of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), other factors—such as the U.S.-administered Northern Distribution Network to supply its forces in Afghanistan and the expectation of economic liberalization in parts of Central Asia—were likely more immediate considerations. By the time BTK was commissioned in 2017, however, it was widely heralded as the final piece in a prominent route for the BRI.

In addition, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia had cooperated regularly on security issues well before the inauguration of the Trabzon format. In 2002, the three states signed a trilateral security cooperation pact, which was regarded as a companion to the U.S.-proffered Train and Equip program in Georgia that same year.¹² In addition, in the aftermath of the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, Turkey sought to position itself as a regional mediator through its proposed *Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform*, which would have included Georgia and Azerbaijan as well as Russia and Armenia.¹³ While this was not an explicitly trilateral endeavor, it evidently sought to leverage Turkey’s close ties with Georgia

¹² Mustafa Aydin, “Foucault’s Pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus,” *Turkish Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468384042000228576>.

¹³ Ali Babacan, “Calming the Caucasus,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/opinion/23iht-edbabacan.1.16407371.html>.

and Azerbaijan on one hand, and its cordial ties with Russia on the other, in the service of mediation, stability, and perhaps regional leadership.¹⁴

Alongside these various trilateral efforts, an even greater number of bilateral cooperation regimes existed among the three states. While not necessarily formally connected, many of these arrangements had certain linkages due to the close relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan.¹⁵ For example, security assistance between Turkey and Georgia brought Georgian military representatives into regular contact with their Azerbaijani counterparts, who had longstanding military cooperation agreements with Turkey.

What is notable about the period prior to the launch of the Trabzon trilateral format in 2012 is the degree to which an array of significant cooperative endeavors preceded institutionalization, rather than the other way around. From that perspective, the formal establishment of the Trabzon format of TAG trilateral cooperation was arguably unnecessary, as the three states had already demonstrated their ability to cooperate closely in complex joint initiatives.

While the Trabzon Declaration institutionalized TAG trilateral cooperation, it was not until the third meeting of the Trabzon format that the platform began to assume a more structured character,¹⁶ encompassing ministerial-level meetings and working groups. In a 2014 meeting, the trilateral format was elevated to include the three countries' leaders, which suggested a gradual expansion of the format across key organs of the respective governments – indicating both a high level of coordination, as well as growing ambition. Since then, the trilateral format has continued to expand to include the presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, defense ministers, economy ministers, and military chiefs of the three states. In addition, working groups were established to develop and function in areas such as economic cooperation, energy cooperation, infrastructure security, defense, and the defense industry. Furthermore, the respective parliaments of the three states have held regular and frequent consultations, including through a trilateral parliamentary grouping to coordinate trilateral cooperation through legislative action in all three member states.

¹⁴ While Turkey at that time did not have formal diplomatic relations with Armenia—as it still does not—the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform concept coincided with a period of thawing relations between Ankara and Yerevan amid a mutual push for normalization. Like the platform concept itself, those efforts did not come to fruition.

¹⁵ See Bayram Balci, "Strengths and Constraints of Turkish Policy in the South Caucasus," Commentary, *Insight Turkey* 16, no. 2 (2014): 43-52, 43, www.insightturkey.com/author/bayram-balci/the-ak-party-dominant-party-new-turkey-and-polarization-1; and Cecire, "The Bilateral Origins of South Caucasus Trilateralism."

¹⁶ Zaur Shiryev, "Institutionalizing a Trilateral Strategic Partnership: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey," Policy Paper (Tbilisi, Georgia: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2016), www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_43884-1522-1-30.pdf.

Characteristics of TAG Trilateral Cooperation

TAG trilateral cooperation, so far, stands out not only for its relative durability and institutionalization but also for its organizational austerity. Unlike other regional cooperative ventures, it does not host a permanent secretariat or administrative bureaucracy, nor does it maintain a public, regular calendar of meetings or consultations.¹⁷ Instead, it operates through trilateral senior-level consultations between respective state organs, which assign technical areas of responsibility to trilateral working groups operating at the sub-ministerial level between senior-level consultations.

For example, a recent memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the three states on defense cooperation outlines numerous areas of collaboration and directs the relevant competent ministries to jointly establish a working group to develop annual work plans in support of these goals.¹⁸ Those working groups perform technical tasks to support other forms of mutual consultations, which include ministerial-level meetings as well as various other potential formats.

The same MoU also elaborates on other aspects of TAG trilateral cooperation. For one, it enshrines cooperation between the three parties, committing them to a five-year term with automatic annual renewal thereafter. Notably, the activities of the joint working group are classified and cannot be shared with any other party. While the practice of classifying the activities of a working group is not, in itself, unusual, doing so for an inter-state trilateral grouping is potentially more significant.

Despite the closed nature of the working groups, certain efforts and activities are generally credited as originating from formal TAG trilateral cooperation. In the economic realm, these include: the launch of the BTK railway and its continued development to expand cargo and passenger freight capacity; ongoing coordination on existing pipelines and their interface with the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP); and boosting cross-border trade, tourism, and investment. In the security realm, the three states have cooperated extensively on military education, medicine, and the defense industry, and have regularly conducted joint special forces military drills and computer-based exercises since 2015, focusing on infrastructure protection – particularly pipeline security.¹⁹

¹⁷ The cycle of consultations between senior-level officials and the designations of annual plans and agendas for working groups and other tripartite entities suggest there may be an internal calendar of sorts, but these do not appear to be generally made available to the public.

¹⁸ Abdullah Bozkurt, "Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan to Boost Cooperation in Military, Defense," *Nordic Monitor*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.nordicmonitor.com/2019/06/turkey-georgia-and-azerbaijan-to-boost-cooperation-in-military-defense/>.

¹⁹ Shiryev, "Institutionalizing a Trilateral Strategic Partnership."

More broadly, the continued expansion of the Trabzon format to other state organs, along with its regular cadence of consultations at the highest levels, implies the existence of additional activities that are not generally made public. As the 2019 MoU showed—in a relatively rare exposure of the trilateral grouping’s inner workings—TAG trilateral cooperation involved an extensive variety of areas. The defense sphere alone, being the subject of that MoU, was relatively expansive in the breadth of its structures, and maintained a mutual classification typically reserved only for close allies.²⁰

Operationally, TAG trilateral cooperation has practical effects in the planning and execution of the various trilateral projects the format oversees, including military cooperation and exercises, contingency planning, economic integration, infrastructure development and protection, and similar initiatives. While TAG trilateral cooperation was launched in Trabzon as a format to “smooth” issues and enable more seamless cooperation between the three states, it has since expanded significantly to the point where it now operates on its own power.²¹

Regime complementarity, though not the overall focus of this article, shows promise for further inquiry. While TAG trilateral cooperation is primarily a foreign policy and cross-border phenomenon, it is worth noting that the three states have long inhabited relatively comparable regime types. In particular, deepening autocratic governance in Turkey, and especially Azerbaijan, has been a prominent feature, while Georgia’s persistent difficulties in consolidating its democracy appear to be a contributing factor.

As such, TAG trilateral cooperation might be considered a viable example of how security governance can exist and even flourish in “minilateral” formats among autocratic states (or autocratically inclined states, in the case of Georgia). Georgia’s comparative democracy may appear to some observers to be inconsistent. Still, it arguably has as much tendency toward autocracy as it does toward democracy – particularly given that when the Trabzon Format was established in 2012, it was recognizably autocratic. While some corrections were made in the years following, autocratic features have again become increasingly prominent over time in Georgia, to the point where its authoritarianism is comparable to that of Turkey.

²⁰ For example, in Western states, the “shareability” of information, even with close allies, can be a prolonged process. For anglophone states in the “Five Eyes” community, this process is simplified by treaty, with comparable (if lesser) arrangements made within NATO or bilaterally. For non-treaty initiatives, such as the National Technology Industrial Base—a cooperative U.S. designation for key defense industrial partners, including Canada and, more recently, the United Kingdom and Australia—proceedings are typically not held in classified environments. For a UK perspective on international intelligence cooperation, including “intelligence diplomacy,” see Sir Stephen Lander, “International Intelligence Cooperation: An inside Perspective,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2004): 481-493, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0955757042000296964>.

²¹ Cecire, “The Bilateral Origins of South Caucasus Trilateralism.”

Furthermore, TAG trilateral cooperation has had the practical effect of establishing an “indigenous” mechanism for security governance that is separate from Western security structures and engagement. While Euro-Atlantic moorings may have been a motivating factor in its original conception, or in justifying its development, TAG trilateral cooperation is not dependent on the West and can be easily adapted for non-aligned or other alternative alignments. Events after 2022 appear to underscore this reality, as the three states have collectively drifted further from U.S.-led alignment.

Trilateral Cooperation in Foreign Policy

In assessing the substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation, one aspect to consider is placing the trilateral enterprise within the context of the respective member states’ foreign policies. In doing so, it is important to examine the general “compatibility” of TAG trilateral cooperation with the stated and publicly declared policies of those states. While this assessment accounts for recent events, it considers the foreign policies of the three states on the basis of longstanding attributes or principles, rather than on recent oscillations.

Foreign policy is the primary focus of this assessment, as that is the main domain in which TAG trilateral cooperation operates. However, the role that internal political dynamics may play in this process is not ignored or discounted. To some extent, these dynamics are captured in the following analysis, with the additional assumption that a state’s foreign policy over an extended period is generally a reflection of elite and regime consensus.

Turkey

As with Azerbaijan and Georgia, Turkish foreign policy defies reduction to a single overriding consideration, further complicated by Turkey’s position as a much larger and more regionally (and globally) engaged power. That said, despite the many permutations of Turkey’s foreign policy since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, one recurring theme has been the notion of a populist nationalism tethered to Islamism, with regional and even global pretensions. This unique ideological brand has been dubbed “Erdoganism” by Yilmaz and Bashirov,²² “Islamist Nationalism” by Saraçoğlu and Demirkol,²³ and “Muslim Nationalism” by Çınar.²⁴ While the terminology may differ, all of these labels en-

²² Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov, “The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1812-1830, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447371>.

²³ Cenk Saraçoğlu and Özhan Demirkol, “Nationalism and Foreign Policy Discourse in Turkey Under the AKP Rule: Geography, History and National Identity,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2014): 301-319, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2014.947152>.

²⁴ Menderes Çınar, “Turkey’s ‘Western’ or ‘Muslim’ Identity and the AKP’s Civilizational Discourse,” *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): 176-197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2017.1411199>.

compass the idea that Turkish nationality is inexorably linked to its Islamic character and serves the aim of positioning Turkey as a leading regional and international power. This is not necessarily a wholesale rejection of all aspects of Turkey's historic Western orientation, but rather a recasting of Turkey from a distantly orbiting satellite of the West into a distinctive pole of global power—and even a civilizational system—in its own right.

AKP foreign policy doctrine, such as Ahmet Davutoğlu's *Strategic Depth* (2001) and its operational counterpart *Zero Problems*,²⁵ reflects an emergent agenda aimed at consolidating Turkish power regionally and globally. Turkish diplomatic offensives in the 2000s, along with interventions across the Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia, exemplify this approach. While individual policies have sometimes produced unintended consequences or rapid shifts, the overarching theme remains clear. This agenda coexists uneasily with Turkey's longstanding Euro-Atlantic ties, particularly NATO, which it relies on to stabilize security amid regional tensions. TAG trilateral cooperation embodies a durable yet relatively quiet aspect of this foreign policy priority, supporting Turkey's influence in its neighborhood and beyond. However, if the Turkish government were to seek to instrumentalize TAG trilateral cooperation to revise its regional positions—especially in an abrupt or rapid fashion—that could undermine the very stability that this tripartite platform has successfully fostered.

Azerbaijan

A cornerstone of Azerbaijani foreign policy has been the concept of “multivectorism,” which is an explicit nod to the continued primacy of the Western liberal order (and of the U.S. in particular) and the regional hegemony of Russia. While the concept has variously ascended or declined over the years, it has been a stated principle of Azerbaijani foreign and security policy since the presidency of Heydar Aliyev, the current President İlham Aliyev's father and predecessor.²⁶

²⁵ For in-depth treatments of strategic depth in English, Murinson offered an analytical account of how strategic depth translated into Turkish foreign policy: Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 6 (2006): 945-964, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200600923526>. Aras hailed Davutoglu's foreign policy agenda as “successful” in an analysis not atypical for the time. See Bülent Aras, “The Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 127-142, www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-davutoglu-era-in-turkish-foreign-policy. However, following the events of the Arab Spring and the onset of the Syrian civil war, by the mid-2010s perceptions had shifted considerably. Behlül Özkan, “Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119-140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.941570>. For a more expansive account of AKP foreign policy, see Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2015).

²⁶ Jason E. Strakes, “Situating the ‘Balanced Foreign Policy’: The Role of System Structure in Azerbaijan's Multi-Vector Diplomacy,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 37-67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2013.766085>.

Strakes shows that Azerbaijani foreign policy maintains frequent contact and alignment with Russia, balanced by security cooperation agreements with the United States. However, Russian influence has grown in recent years. While Russian power ascends regionally amid waning Western influence, there is a growing view of China as an emerging strategic partner.²⁷ At the same time, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is inseparable from its close relationship with Turkey—rooted in ethnic and linguistic affinities²⁸—and its ongoing conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, which has become more complex since 2020. Although Turkey was not a direct party to the conflict, it strongly supports Azerbaijan diplomatically and militarily through a mutual defense treaty.

Similarly, Turkey-Azerbaijan ties, described by Aydin and Ismayilov as foundational for trilateral cooperation,²⁹ underpin TAG's multivectorism – balancing alliances, isolating Armenia, and pursuing trans-Eurasian trade. Notably, TAG cooperation has shifted from a Western orientation to also embracing Eurasian and East Asian engagement, particularly with China. This analysis does not consider events from 2020 onward, including the second Nagorno-Karabakh war and Azerbaijan's subsequent capture of all its claimed outstanding territory. However, Azerbaijan's decisive alignment with Russia since that point, and particularly since 2022, fits well within the framework of a foreign policy orientation that is markedly less Western-oriented, resulting in TAG trilateral cooperation that is increasingly decoupled from Euro-Atlantic pretensions.

Georgia

On the whole, Georgian foreign policy has emphatically and demonstrably embraced a Euro-Atlantic orientation as its centerpiece, consistently making EU and NATO membership a stated government priority. It has positioned itself in the region as a close partner to Europe, the United States, and Euro-Atlantic institutions, particularly NATO.³⁰

Despite Georgia's longstanding efforts, strong credentials, and NATO's official "open door" policy, it is broadly perceived as unlikely to join the alliance in the near to medium term, if ever. For instance, Kyle highlights Georgian military

²⁷ Bai Lianlei, "Azerbaijan in the Silk Road Economic Belt: A Chinese Perspective," China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), August 2016; Feride Inan and Diana Yayloyan, "New Economic Corridors in the South Caucasus and the Chinese One Belt One Road" (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, 2018), https://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/New_Economic_Corridors_in_the_South_Caucasus_and_the_Chinese_One_Belt_One_Road_2018.pdf.

²⁸ Aydin, "Foucault's Pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus."

²⁹ Aydin, "Foucault's Pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus;" and Murad Ismayilov, "Azerbaijan's Russia Conundrum: Towards the Rise of an Unlikely Alliance," *Russian Politics* 4, no. 2 (2019): 242-267, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00402005>.

³⁰ Michael Cecire, "Georgia's 2012 Elections and Lessons for Democracy Promotion," *Orbis* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 232-250, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2013.02.003>.

vulnerability and NATO's internal disunity as obstacles.³¹ Similarly, Germany has argued that Georgia's—and Ukraine's—aspirations face technical and political barriers, while the tension between NATO's Open Door policy and Georgia's unresolved membership bid risks further friction. Georgia's EU accession prospects are also dim due to internal political and developmental challenges.³²

This precarious position places Georgian foreign policy at a crossroads.³³ On one hand, Georgia is unlikely to secure the economic and security benefits of NATO or EU membership; on the other, abandoning Euro-Atlantic ambitions could weaken its position against Russia. Nonetheless, close partnerships with Western states and institutions have granted Georgia some autonomy despite power asymmetries,³⁴ reflecting domestic ideological divides.³⁵

Moreover, Georgia has pursued robust relations with Turkey, China, and Iran to balance Russia. In this context, TAG trilateral cooperation serves as a key vehicle for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and offers a platform for engagement with Turkey as a regional power and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Beyond security, TAG supports Georgian priorities such as territorial disputes.³⁶ While Georgia's post-2020 authoritarian and "Eurasianist" turn aligns with TAG's evolving framework, this cooperation remains neither fully dependent on nor opposed to Euro-Atlantic ties.

But Is It Substantive?

By employing and accordingly revising the "institutional thickness" framework of Amin and Thrift (1995),³⁷ the substantiveness of Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia (TAG) trilateral cooperation can be considered along a multi-dimensional rubric

³¹ Joe Kyle, "Perspectives Roadblocks: Georgia's Long Road to NATO Membership," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 237-247, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/721877>.

³² Martin Nilsson and Daniel Silander, "Democracy and Security in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood? Assessing the ENP in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine," *Democracy and Security* 12, no. 1 (2016): 44-61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2015.11357441>.

³³ Michael Hikari Cecire, "Georgia's Alliance With – Not In – NATO: External Balancing, Autonomy and Community," in *Georgia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Challenges for a Small State*, ed. Tracey German, Stephen F. Jones, and Kornely Kakachia (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022): 179-194, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755645350.ch-9>.

³⁴ Michael H. Cecire, "Russian Hegemony Begets Georgian Discontents: Tbilisi's Search for Strategic Ballast," *Russian Analytical Digest (RAD)* No. 232, February 22, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000328891>.

³⁵ Kevork Oskanian, "The Balance Strikes Back: Power, Perceptions, and Ideology in Georgian Foreign Policy, 1992–2014," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 628-652, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orw010>.

³⁶ Andrew C. Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, and Oliver Backes, *Georgia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests* (Center for Strategic & International Studies and Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160429_Kuchins_GeorgiaReconnectingEurasia_Web.pdf.

³⁷ Amin and Thrift, eds., *Globalization, Institutions, and Regional Development in Europe*.

to assess its context and thickness as a geopolitical enterprise. To that end, five basic elements are proposed in this heuristic analysis:

- (1) *Institutionalization* – the degree to which TAG trilateral cooperation is embedded in the national policy activities of each of the three participating states;
- (2) *breadth* – the degree to which TAG trilateral cooperation is institutionally evident across multiple governmental (and nongovernmental) sectors in the three participating states;
- (3) *importance* – the manner by which TAG trilateral cooperation is assigned priority by the national governments of the three participating member states;
- (4) *durability* – the institutional staying power of TAG trilateral cooperation over time; and
- (5) *depth* – the degree to which TAG trilateral cooperation filters below the national, agenda-setting level to the working levels of government, and beyond government to the community and popular levels.

The following sections consider each of the five elements of the substantiveness framework separately. This is followed by a section examining the framework holistically. Each element is assessed both as to whether it is applicable (binary assessment) and then coded on an ordinal scale representing degree—low, moderate, or high—which can be expressed qualitatively (1, 2, and 3, respectively) for purposes of tallying.

Institutionalization

Institutionalization, in the context of assessing the substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation, refers to the degree to which TAG trilateral cooperation is embedded in the national policy activities of each of the three participating states. Specifically, this aspect considers how TAG cooperation aligns with, or conflicts with, broader national state policies (foreign and domestic) and discursive practices. In summary, TAG trilateral cooperation is considered highly institutionalized in each of the three participating states, albeit in varying respects.

This institutionalization is reflected, in part, in the way trilateral cooperation is harmonized with the three countries' respective foreign policies (as outlined above), whereby it remains consistent with broader strategic and regional objectives despite shifting internal and regional circumstances since the Trabzon Declaration was announced in 2012. More specifically, TAG trilateral cooperation also appears to comport with other aspects of cross-border relationships between the three states, such as shared energy infrastructure, common transit and transport links like the BTK railway, and the relatively free circulation of goods, capital, and people among them.

However, TAG trilateral cooperation lacks a single unifying institutional structure. Unlike other nominal regional groupings, it does not possess a treaty-bound legal basis of its own or an organic organizational apparatus with authority or

particular influence over the domestic state organs of the participating states. In lieu of more formal structures, it is managed through regular conferences between the heads of state, heads of government, and agency chiefs of the three countries. As noted above, this arrangement devolves institutional implementation to the deputy minister and working levels of the respective state bureaucracies, which has resulted in a variety of shared policy developments, joint projects, and other forms of cooperation. Common trilateral infrastructure may be the most notable and visible example, but other significant elements include regular joint military exercises (of multiple types), defense industry cooperation, and economic and commercial collaboration, such as in the trilateral business forums.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) available in the open-source domain provides further evidence of the institutionalization of TAG trilateral cooperation.³⁸ The MoU, a product of a trilateral ministerial meeting between the defense ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, outlines an array of sectoral cooperation (Article 4) and extensive forms of cooperation (Article 5); the latter speaks to the institutional elements that undergird the TAG trilateral cooperation enterprise. Those forms of cooperation include: (1) meetings of ministers “and other military and civilian officials”; (2) working visits and meetings; (3) joint discussions and consultations; (4) joint seminars, trainings, and conferences; (5) “establishment of direct contact mechanisms between units, staffs, and other institutions organizing national defence”; (6) exchanges among national defense universities, military colleges, institutions and training centers; (7) exchange of instructor teams; (8) military education trainings; (9) joint exercises; and (10) cultural and sports events. In addition, Article 7 establishes a relevant working group and annual plans of cooperation, and Article 8—notably—provides a basis for the exchange of classified information. Given the above, and assuming such cooperation plans are in fact carried out, it can be said that TAG trilateral cooperation is highly institutionalized.

Breadth

Breadth, in the context of assessing the substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation, refers to the degree to which this cooperation is institutionally evident across multiple governmental (and nongovernmental) sectors in the three participating states. Breadth may be considered a measure of substantiveness in that it suggests multiple, mutually reinforcing networks of sectoral cooperation between the three states. While breadth may not, on its own, constitute evidence of substantiveness, neither is a lack of breadth evidence of non-substantiveness, as cooperation within a single sector may demonstrate significant, substantive operability on its own. However, the breadth of the enterprise is one measure of its reach in, throughout, and outside government. As such, the

³⁸ Bozkurt, “Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan to Boost Cooperation in Military, Defense.”

breadth of TAG trilateral cooperation offers a snapshot of the extent to which it is a relevant policy concern.

Given the manner in which TAG trilateral cooperation has developed—as a regular conference and coordination platform across senior levels of government—the breadth of the endeavor is readily apparent. While the TAG trilateral cooperation platform, as launched by the 2012 Trabzon Declaration, began as an initiative at the foreign-minister level, it has since broadened to include the portfolios of the three countries' prime ministers (heads of government), presidents (heads of state), foreign ministers, defense ministers, economy ministers, and military chiefs. Below the executive levels, working groups have been established across a variety of sectors, including energy, business and economy, defense and defense industry, cybersecurity, and environmental issues, among others. More broadly, TAG trilateral cooperation extends beyond the governmental realm to commerce and business, educational exchanges, transit and transportation, and nongovernmental organizations. For example, this is seen in the BTK railway's carriage of commercial freight, educational exchanges between higher education institutions in the three countries, and broader business cooperation. In many respects, TAG trilateral cooperation can be said to have a high level of breadth across the three participating states.

Importance

Importance refers to the manner in which TAG trilateral cooperation is assigned priority by the national governments of the three participating member states. In this case, importance might be considered through two sub-elements: first, the prominence it enjoys in the respective participating governments; and second, the way in which that prominence is maintained across shifting political circumstances. In both respects, TAG trilateral cooperation appears to rate strongly, as the trilateral enterprise has repeatedly received attention at the senior-most levels of the participating governments since its formal inception in 2012.

Regarding the second sub-element, levels of engagement by the participating states have continued to remain high even amid shifting political circumstances. While only Georgia has experienced significant political transitions over this period (parliamentary elections in late 2012³⁹ and presidential elections in 2013), internal political shifts of note have occurred in all three states in the intervening years, with consequences for domestic and foreign policies. Yet TAG trilateral cooperation has never faced significant scrutiny, much less been curtailed or abandoned, in any of the participating states. On the contrary, trilateral cooperation appears to have continued to grow, even in defiance of other considera-

³⁹ For more information on the 2012 Georgian parliamentary elections, see Cecire, "Georgia's 2012 Elections and Lessons for Democracy Promotion."

tions. However, examining the underlying puzzle behind TAG trilateral cooperation and its continued growth in the face of seemingly divergent interests is beyond the scope of this article.

Given the above, TAG trilateral cooperation appears to be highly important to all three participating states, reflecting a certain prioritization by their governments. This does demand certain caveats, however, as even “high” importance does not render it a matter of overriding or urgent concern; other policies and issues certainly merit greater day-to-day attention in the participating states. However, this may also be considered an aspect of the importance of TAG trilateral cooperation, in that it inspires little regular controversy, functions routinely across multiple levels of government in the participating states, and may be seen as a policy pillar amid other shifting concerns and matters of urgency.

Durability

Durability refers to the institutional staying power of TAG trilateral cooperation over time. Given that TAG trilateral cooperation has endured as a formal platform since the 2012 Trabzon Declaration—and even longer if judged on an informal basis—it can be said that it is highly durable as a platform thus far.

This assessment is not without caveats, however. Although TAG trilateral cooperation has not only endured but also expanded its role and breadth since 2012, it has not faced significant direct scrutiny or disruption. What does appear to be the case, however, is that shifting political and regional strategic circumstances have not appreciably upset trilateral cooperation. Several notable events might have had the potential to challenge it, but did not appear to do so: the transitions in power from Georgia’s United National Movement to the opposition Georgian Dream party in 2012 and 2013; the attempted coup d’état in Turkey in 2016 and the subsequent restoration of Turkey-Russia cooperation; and the anti-Western turn in Azerbaijani politics in 2014 (and rapprochement with Russia), for example.

Despite these and other major political and strategic events in each of the three states, TAG trilateral cooperation has remained durable and has even expanded in many areas. Nevertheless, while TAG trilateral cooperation continues to persist amid such shifts, a reasonable rejoinder might question its durability in relative terms – durability compared to what? Compared to other regional groupings, TAG trilateral cooperation may indeed be impressively durable, though it does not possess the same institutional longevity as other international alignments.

In that sense, if TAG trilateral cooperation can be said to be highly durable, it is a conditional designation: it could be quickly undone should events or circumstances warrant it. Yet the fact that it has not only endured but also shown signs of further development suggests that it holds extended utility—whether material or ideational—for each of the three states. One example is the way TAG trilateral cooperation has shifted over time from a reflection of the three states’

varying but collective Western alignment to a more “indigenous” grouping, increasingly separable from Euro-Atlantic affinities and even resilient to them. This latter factor may be particularly important in the post-2020 period.

Depth

Depth refers to the degree to which TAG trilateral cooperation extends below the national, agenda-setting level to the working levels of government, and beyond government to the community and popular levels. On this factor, TAG trilateral cooperation appears to have moderate depth among the participating states, inherent to the functionality of the TAG trilateral cooperation platform – i.e., the Trabzon platform and subsequent developments. This sets agendas at the executive level while devolving implementation and operational responsibilities to working groups and the relevant ministries.

However, it is less clear to what extent the participating states have internalized TAG trilateral cooperation within the respective governments and beyond. This is particularly the case at the community and popular levels, where perceptions of the other participating states and their peoples vary and do not reflect a coherent, unified supra-identity or in-group.⁴⁰ Although there are areas of cultural and social exchange among the three states—such as Turkish soap operas, Georgian wine, and Azerbaijani hydrocarbons—they are generally fragmented and disconnected from broader narratives of TAG trilateral cooperation.

Assessment of Substantiveness

In summary, the five-element heuristic framework demonstrates the broad substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation. The table below illustrates the results of the substantiveness assessment.

Each of the constituent elements—institutionalization, breadth, importance, durability, and depth—was found to be present in the context of TAG trilateral cooperation for the participating states. This basic threshold met, TAG trilateral cooperation can be described as being substantive, and potentially significantly so. Being a heuristic exercise, the substantiveness assessment serves as an initial analytical framework and as a basis for additional examinations of TAG trilateral cooperation.

⁴⁰ This assertion is based on polls from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers’ Caucasus Barometer tool, which includes opinion polling from the three South Caucasus states (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia), including datasets that query respondents on their perceptions of other ethnicities. A similar poll in Turkey could not be identified; however, informal interviews with experts on Turkish domestic affairs offered similar view of the complex opinion landscape.

Table 1. Substantiveness Assessment at a Glance.

Substantiveness Element	Binary Assessment	Ordinal Assessment
Institutionalization	Yes	High (3)
Breadth	Yes	High (3)
Importance	Yes	High (3)
Durability	Yes	High* (2.5) ⁴¹
Depth	Yes	Moderate (2)

Broader Considerations

TAG trilateral cooperation is indeed substantial and complementary. The mooted substantiveness of TAG trilateral cooperation has featured in policy and academic writing as a kind of given, by virtue of its relatively high level of governmental attention and seeming durability, and further evinced by the mutual and self-referential nature of its supposed importance.⁴² *Prima facie*, TAG trilateral cooperation has passed the “eye test” for regional scholars and, to the extent it has featured in regional discourses, has not been subjected to any kind of testing of its substantiveness – particularly notable given the relative paucity of successful interstate groupings endogenous to the region. Using a basic heuristic analytical framework, TAG trilateral cooperation does indeed appear to have highly substantive attributes and may be considered substantive in totality.

As of late 2024, TAG trilateral cooperation does not appear to have lessened and, in some respects, has continued its trajectory of development even amid differing foreign policy orientations – particularly a categorical increase in accommodation with Moscow among all three states, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia. In that regard, TAG trilateral cooperation may be categorized as part of a trend toward authoritarian-leaning security governance models in geopolitically tense areas. This highlights how trilateral cooperation can foster stability without the constraints of democratic accountability, enhancing each regime’s

⁴¹ Functionally, this was coded as an intermediate between moderate (2) and high (3), thus receiving a score of 2.5 for tallying purposes.

⁴² In this sense, analysts and scholars have highlighted its importance partly by citing other works that also claim its significance, and vice versa. While this has some value, as it reflects the assessments of a selection of qualified experts, its mutual and self-referential nature also renders it somewhat tautological – its importance is demonstrated merely by others claiming it to be important.

ability to respond to both internal and external security threats without dependency on Western patronage, which can be more sensitive to questions of human rights and democracy. Future research would do well to explore these themes further, as well as to account more fully for events since 2020, particularly the role that Armenia—and Russia—has played in the formation, maintenance, and evolution of TAG trilateral cooperation.

Disclaimer

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