

How to Define the Presence of the Türkiye in the South Caucasus: NATO or Turkic World?

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The 44 Days War has changed the situation not just in Karabakh but also in the South Caucasus. As a result of the Second Karabakh War and even the current war in Ukraine, Russia became among the powers in the South Caucasus, and Türkiye became a rising power in the region. The question is how to define Turkish presence in the region as a member of NATO or as a founding member of the Organization of Turkic States.

As it is known, Russia started to build its colonial hegemony because of the Iran-Russian wars and the Turkmen-Chay treaty, which became the legal base for Russian presence in the Caucasus (Valiyev, 2023) was signed between Iran and Tsarist Russia. In contrast, the Turkish/Ottoman attempts to include the Islamic Army of the Caucasus failed. Since the nineteenth and even in the early twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire was in the process of dissolution and was looking for new ideological strategies to maintain the integrity of the Empire. Respectively, the Ottoman Empire declared its dissolution and the new Turkish Republic, including Turkishness, restricted its strategy within Anatolia. In this sense, the Turkish attempt in terms of presence in the Caucasus did not fully succeed. Even though it was an unsuccessful attempt, the Islamic Army of the Caucasus and its role in establishing the first republic of Azerbaijan was decisive and became alive in the collective memory of the Azerbaijani people for a century. Parallel to that, the first republic of Azerbaijan, due to the historical and political conjuncture, failed to be a fully-fledged state in terms of de jure principles.

Further, during the Soviet time, Russian presence and hegemony in the South Caucasus were institutionalised. So, building national identity and history occurred during the Soviet time. For this reason, Soviet time in Azerbaijan or the region could be identified as an institutionalisation of the subjection of Russia, which was started by Tsarist Russia. Since Türkiye spent most of its savings on the

fight against the invaders, it could not pursue an active policy regarding the Caucasus during the Second World War and even the Cold War. Contrary to NATO membership, the Caucasus was not the agenda of Turkish politics until the 1980s. From the beginning of the Republic, Türkiye maintained its closed strategy.

However, the dissolution of the USSR at the end of the Cold War opened possibilities to develop politics regarding the South Caucasus. In this sense, it is clear that Azerbaijan would be the main ally for Türkiye in the South Caucasus. On the other hand, the Armenian invasion made a break for Turkish political and military presence and cooperation in the region. More precisely, relations between the two nations would be based on the invasion and liberation of Karabakh. Notwithstanding, thanks to the contract of the century between Azerbaijan and the international consortium, Türkiye got an opportunity to build and even develop cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Parallel to that, after the dissolution of the USSR, Türkiye announced its strategy towards Middle Asia or Turkistan, later the Turkic World, from the Adriatic Sea to China. However, neither strategies nor discourses could not succeed. Furthermore, Turkish economic, military, and even political capacity was not enough to meet possible requests. So, it seems that going from the Adriatic Sea to China was not a rational, pragmatic strategy at that time. In addition, the former Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had been identified as “frozen” regarding the “disputed” lands being the main wall against Turkish presence in the region. Azerbaijan, the main ally in the region, had to invest its capacity to solve and liberate its invaded lands. Hence, the Armenian occupation became one of the main hindrances to regional stability and strengthening economic cooperation in the region.

However, the third millennium would come with opportunities and challenges as well. So, Türkiye focused on independent strategies, and being much more independent in terms of the military industry and the enhancing capacity of the military became a priority for Turkish policymakers. Türkiye declared and maintained its support to Azerbaijan in terms of the Karabakh invasion over the last 30 years. However, it was not enough to stop the invasion and liberate the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

Nonetheless, Azerbaijan liberated its invaded territories and became a fully-fledged sovereign state over its internationally recognised territories. In contrast to the past, Türkiye played an active role during the Second Karabakh War. In one sense, thanks to the Second Karabakh War, Türkiye and Azerbaijan set out to lay out the foundation of Turkic presence in the South Caucasus. In another sense, however, NATO, Türkiye is interested in establishing an independent strategy in terms of the Organization of Turkic States. So, the Turkic world is already become a priority for Turkish policymakers.

Notwithstanding, at first glance, to conceptualise Turkish presence in the South Caucasus, especially in Azerbaijan, its NATO membership should be taken into consideration. On the other hand, Türkiye is a country that has enhanced its independent decision-making capability. Further, the South Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan strategy, emerged in the early 20th century. So, Azerbaijan is one of the main allies in terms of the “one nation, two states” political discourse. Even through NATO membership, Türkiye has been trying to build its circle in terms of deepening economic relations. In this sense, the Organization of Turkic States emerged as one of the leading, productive platforms.

The Turkish presence in the region is formed based on NATO and the Turkic World, which need to be taken into consideration as the main pillars of Turkish presence in the South Caucasus. In this sense, it needs to be mentioned that Türkiye, which is the leading and locomotive state in terms of the established political system of the Organization of Turkic World, is just a middle power. So, unlike the

90s strategy, Türkiye considered the region with NATO, regardless of subjection. For this reason, the Organization of Turkish States, starting from Nakhchivan, represents Turkey's independent regional policy.

To sum up, to explain the rising and evolving Turkish presence in the region, its NATO membership and Turkic World priority should be taken into consideration. This kind of evaluation is important in correctly understanding the limits of Turkey's capability and importance. So, Türkiye needs to develop a pragmatic, balanced strategy between Russia and the West to implement its independent strategy in the region.