SECURITY BALANCE IN SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Following the 2020 Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the security perception in the South Caucasus began to change rapidly. Even though establishing a 3+3 platform was offered to the regional countries in order to ensure regional peace, no positive development has occurred so far. Topics such as the tension that ensued on the border between Azerbaijan and Iran, the issue of the Armenia-Azerbaijan borders delimitation, and the delay of the promised Zangezur corridor due to Armenia perceiving it as a security threat indicate that the security dilemma may persist for a while.

As is known, border delimitation activities between Armenia and Azerbaijan were initiated under the leadership of Russia. The attempts of the EU, France, and the US to get involved in the equation of the region during the tension on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border was a conspicuous development. [1] The war started by Russia against Ukraine on February 2022 was particularly interpreted as a shift of Russias focus away from the region. This shift of Russia and the Wests interest towards the region was considered as an opportunity for Armenia to free itself from its dependency on Russia. In fact, Nikol Pashinyans, who is known for his anti-Russia stance before his election, rapprochement with the West and NATO even before the 2020 Karabakh War rang alarm bells for Russia. In 2020, during the operation initiated by Azerbaijan for the liberation of its occupied lands, Armenian officials expected Russias support (actually as part of the Collective Security Treaty-CSTO), however, they did not receive the help they expected. On top of that, the statements coming from Russia demanding the start of preparations for the opening of the Zengezur road as part of the truce of 9 November indicate that there is a conflict of interest between Russia and Armenia. It is being discussed whether the alliance with Russia is beneficial to Armenia and whether it is possible to leave the CSTO.[2]

These discussions have become more salient following the protests started by Azerbaijani environmental activists on the Lachin road. This is because, following the case of Azerbaijani authorities being prevented by the Armenian separatists from inspecting the

environmental pollution in the areas in Khankendi and its surroundings which are being held by separatists, Azerbaijani environmental activists started protests on the Lachin road. The Armenian side appealed to organizations such as the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, claiming that the said actions pose a threat to the security of Armenians. On the other hand, Prime Minister Pashinyan's allegations that the Russian Peacekeeping Force could not fulfil or is not fulfilling its task also escalated the tension between Russia and Armenia.[3]

Behind all these developments, it is seen that there are some other incidents aimed at redesigning the security of Armenia without the involvement of Russia.[4]

There have been a number of interesting visits to Armenia in the past months. As one may recall, the Armenian Prime Minister made some personnel changes claiming that there were intelligence leaks during the Karabakh war. Following the investigations launched after these reassignments, there were some news reports claiming that some intelligence was leaked through the Russian social media platform Odnok.[5] In addition, Pashinyan made claims to the press that there was a coup attempt planned against his administration. Operations launched during that time paved the way for the reforming of the system of intelligence in Armenia which had been maintained since the Soviet period. A series of contacts began to take place as part of establishing a foreign intelligence service that would report directly to the prime minister. For the first time in its history, the CIA US Director visited Armenia, followed by the Armenian Defense Ministers visits to the CIA and the UK. And lastly, the Chief of MI6 paid a visit to Yerevan.[6] These visits pointed out that the new intelligence agency that will be established in Armenia will be designed within the framework of the aspiration to act independently from Russia.

For the US and the UK, achieving such an impact in Armenia is very important with regard to the process that started with the Ukraine war. Despite the discussions taking place in Georgia with the intention of forming a second front against Russia, it is understood that the second front established against Russia from behind the scenes is in fact Armenia. As a matter of fact, some international organizations are publishing risk analyses explaining that the risk of conflict in the region has risen again.[7] The appointment of the former Deputy Ambassador of Ukraine as Ambassador to Armenia by the US seems to be one of the indicators of this situation.[8]

Will Iran Realize That It Might Be Making Some Miscalculations?

The possibility that the US and the UK will support such activity in Armenia and create an intelligence network on their own axis constitutes a threat to Iran as well as Russia. However, Iran interprets the threats from the region from a narrower perspective and evaluates them from the axis of the South Azerbaijan issue. Iran, which reacts to the Zangezur road as much as Armenia, considers Turkey and Azerbaijan as threats due to Turkeys NATO membership and Azerbaijans alliance with Israel. Moreover, Iran considers the transportation route between Turkey and Azerbaijan as a corridor of the Turkish world.

Iran's most reliable route on the North-South line passes through Armenia. The creation of

a possible line on the Zangezur corridor would be considered as obstructing the North-South route for Iran (which connects Iran with Russia). However, the increasing Western influence in Armenia is also not a good sign for Iran. Likewise, when the possibility of Westerners installing themselves in Armenia is added to the crisis that the Iranian regime is experiencing due to its internal problems, it seems that a greater threat, such as a future encirclement of Iran through Armenia, may occur.

An Overlap of Conflicting Interests and Security Concerns

It is necessary to evaluate the interest shown by the US and Western countries towards the South Caucasus region, not only in terms of its connection with Russia and Iran but also with regard to its connection with China and India. Due to the sanctions imposed, direct transportation and gas procurement from Russia to Europe have been ceased. In this circumstance, the importance of the Middle Corridor and TANAP is increasing. However, for the US, which prioritizes the goal of stopping the rise of China in its security documents, having control over this corridor is of significant importance.

Azerbaijan and Turkey, on the other hand, want to provide transportation via Zangezur, as a supporting line, in a shorter time and with less cost. However, India and Iran, the most prominent supporters of the North-South route, seem to believe that the project poses a threat to them. Analyzes in India argue that investing in Russia's ally, Armenia, will benefit India. On the other hand, Azerbaijans close relations with Pakistan and Turkey are being perceived as a threat to India's own region.[9] In this context, it is noteworthy that extensive arms sales agreements have been made between Armenia and India.

Although it is not possible for Armenia to leave the CSTO or to take away Russias monopoly on security in the short term, it seems that there is a power vacuum in the region and different states are eager to fill this gap. It is understood that Armenia is trying to make up for what it lost in the 2020 war by seeking as much support as it can, and in this context, it is trying to attract different parties into the region. However, since the interests of these powers will bring along conflicts that may threaten the future of the region, it is necessary to act very carefully. All these indicate that the security equation of the region may change radically.

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Tutku Dilaver graduated from the Department of International Relations of Ankara University □□ Faculty of Political Sciences in 2015. In 2020, Dilaver completed her Master □□ degree in the Caucasus Studies Program under the Department of International Relations at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University □□ Institute of Social Sciences. She has been pursuing her doctoral studies at Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University.

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