Toward a Strategic Culture-Enabled Theory of Black Sea Trilateral Cooperation

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Abstract: This article explores the dynamics of Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Georgia (TAG) trilateral cooperation by integrating strategic culture into the theoretical and empirical analysis of regional alignments. The study begins with an introduction to the TAG trilateral framework, situating it within contemporary regional security concerns. A comprehensive literature review follows, surveying dominant neorealist and positivist approaches to alliance formation, with particular attention to their gradual incorporation of ideational and cultural factors. Building on this foundation, the author develops a theoretical framework centered on strategic culture, emphasizing its utility in complementing materialist explanations by incorporating historical narratives, elite perceptions, and shared norms. The case study of

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TAG trilateral cooperation in the Black Sea region illustrates the explanatory power of this approach, highlighting how nonmaterial factors sustain and expand the alignment beyond energy cooperation to include military coordination, security dialogues, and infrastructure projects. By combining theoretical depth with empirical analysis, this article contributes to the literature on strategic culture and offers a nuanced understanding of how material and nonmaterial factors interact to shape regional cooperation.

Keywords: strategic culture, regional security, alliance formation, trilateral cooperation, Black Sea region

Why do some interstate alignments, cooperation efforts, or even alliances succeed while others fail? How does cooperation and alliance formation occur in otherwise unlikely cases? This article considers the evolution of international relations theoretical models to increasingly account for nonutilitarian, nonmaterialist factors in state interest formation and particularly in alignment and alliance formation. This article further argues that strategic culture as an analytical approach can fortify existing prevailing theoretical models to better integrate material and nonmaterial factors.[1] To illuminate this concept, the article closes with a case study of the phenomenon of Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Georgia (TAG) Black Sea trilateral cooperation in the context of international relations theory.[2]

Although proximity and preexisting energy linkages between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia might provide a basic impetus for certain cross-border and multilateral cooperation, existing energy infrastructure does not on its own sufficiently account for the depth and growth of TAG trilateral

cooperation. Counterintuitively, the expansion and formalization of trilateral mechanisms between the three states have increased and even accelerated while the central element of energy cooperation has materially declined.[3] *Beyond energy cooperation, mechanisms have also grown to include military coordination, regional security dialogues, and joint infrastructure projects.* And while the three states at one point appeared to share similar, or at least particularly complementary, foreign policy priorities, they have by some accounts veered toward increasing variety, if not divergence, on this score in recent years—and yet trilateral cooperation carries on, with greater evidence mounting of integration and mutual cooperation with each passing year.

Even were Black Sea trilateral cooperation to collapse suddenly, the origins of its formation and period of success would remain a theoretical puzzle wanting for consideration. This is partially attributable to limited investigations of Black Sea political dynamics as a whole—with the Black Sea only provided limited consideration as a discrete regional unit in its own right—but also given international relations theory's relatively austere offerings on alliance formation.[4] In particular, interstate cooperation, alignment, and particularly alliance formation literature has much to say about structural and materialist factors influencing alignment and even conflict initiation, but much less on matters of process—and especially nonmaterial variables—in the why and how of interstate cooperation and alliance formation.

This article proposes that strategic culture offers a unique and timely approach to better understanding those matters of process, given the insights that a culturalist approach can yield about how policy alternatives are generated, considered, and acted on in a given sovereign political space.

While structural and material factors can play a significant and even commanding role, this article posits that a strategic cultural approach can assist in identifying how national interests, including material elements, are articulated and prioritized. Using strategic culture as a microscope for endogenous state processes, it is expected that it will be an ideal analytical tool for uncovering and contributing new understandings of alliance formation and state behavior.

The Literature

When considering this research effort in the existing literature, it is important to avoid becoming entangled in the voluminous if only marginally applicable corpus of foreign policy literature specific to the region. While the foreign policies and state and social constructions of the local states will serve as critical grist for any faithful investigation of the region, the priority of first order is examining how this research program fits into prevailing alliance formation literature, which is ultimately the heart of the investigation. Alliance formation is highlighted particularly as the fullest and most tangible expression of strong interstate cooperation and alignment, and therefore it should require the most robust justifications. That said, alliance formation is almost as diffuse and nebulous a concept as "cooperation" and "alignment," as this article will consider later. From that port of embarkation, this article pivots to considerations of strategic culture as a viable approach in international relations, and only then does it take a cursory look at how these elements fit to assessments of local foreign policymaking and state behavior.

In the literature, this author traces the utilitarian, materialist roots of dominant alliance formation theorizing, as expressed in classical and

especially in Waltzian (and Waltian) neorealist thought, and the gradual but evident openness to nonmaterial intervening variables in neoclassical realist approaches to an increasingly culturalist strain in theoretical thinking. From this position, strategic culture in its different approaches is offered as a means by which a more behavioralist-inclusive approach could be adapted to alliance formation theory and how debates within emergent "strategic culturalism" play a role in that potential marriage between positivist traditions and strategic cultural analysis. Finally, the literature turns to the way in which recent literature on the Black Sea and trilateral-relevant phenomena fit into this larger theoretical milieu.

Alliance Formation

As noted, alliance formation is considered particularly as the apogee of interstate cooperation and alignment, or at least as far as relatively common international relations phenomena is concerned. It also represents a comparatively well-theorized and developed set of phenomena, if perhaps not as well-developed as would be liked. While the literature on alliance formation is expansive and by some measures well-formed, it is also not especially conclusive and therefore limiting. The dominant theories of alliance formation are articulated in the positivist, neorealist tradition, which extrapolates concepts of power, material utility, and balance of power to explain alliance formation and interstate alignment. Yet, while these discussions provide a crucial and robust framework for considering interstate dynamics, they tend to avoid grappling with the "why" and "how" of alliance formation; that is, less attention has traditionally been paid to questions of

nonmaterial factors, intervening variables, and those cases where the neorealist paradigm appears insufficient.[5]

In the seminal neorealist theoretical text, *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth N. Waltz casts alliance formation as an outgrowth of balance of power theory, in which states are cast as rational actors seeking to maximize utility and may opt for balancing, an inherently defensive arrangement to offset the perceived power of a potential aggressor, or bandwagoning, where weaker states choose to ally with the stronger state.[6]

"The game of power politics," writes Waltz, "if really played hard, presses the players into two rival camps, though so complicated is the business of making and maintaining alliances that the game may be played hard enough to produce that result only under the pressure of war."[7]

Waltz's contributions define not only alliance formation literature but also neorealist thought and international relations theory as a whole. While Waltz's formulation is perhaps the most well-known and vigorous contribution, it locates itself among a rich classical and neoclassical literature on balance of power as well as among his contemporaries Hans J. Morgenthau, Morton A. Kaplan, and Stephen M. Walt.[8]

It is Walt, perhaps, who is best known for taking a particularly close examination of balance of power theory, and Waltz's contributions in particular, in the context of alliances, alignment, and alliance formation. Throughout his writings, Walt takes pains to emphasize the relative poverty of literature addressing how alliance formation occurs in praxis and offers corollaries and correctives to Waltz's framework. In particular, Walt suggests that alliances form in response to relative, perceived asymmetries of power, present or future (i.e., threats), yet common policy considerations such as

ideology or material inducements (penetration) are cast as being little more than marginal variables—a surprising kind of declaration during the Cold War era, which traded almost exclusively in bipolar exchanges of ideological posturing, proxy wars, and material aid.[9]

Walt's pronouncements on the topic may have been concerned with some of the more practical or at least tangible elements of alliance formation, but it was hardly ignorant of the vast literature that did seek to better understand alliance formation and empirically test it. Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, for example, used empirical modeling to rich effect to test instability and "randomness" in alliance formation, which they concluded was the dominant tendency prior to 1945.[10] Of course, in 1945, which they associate with bloc stability and nonrandomness, is commonly regarded as a watershed for what is now described as the liberal international "system" of norms and supporting multilateral infrastructure primarily, but not exclusively, espoused and advanced by the United States and its allies. In effect, Li and Thompson discovered a link between polar intensity in the post-1945 period with bloc stability. Yet, like other positivist contributions, Li and Thompson's work begs further inquiry into the "how" of sovereign determination in defining and engaging interest-maximizing behavior (in this case, as it pertains to alliance formation).

Similarly, Jack S. Levy sought to understand the role that alliances play in the initiation of conflict and identifies a potential causality problem in the commonly mooted relationship between alliance formation and war.[11] However, in mapping alliance formation and conflict during a 500-year span, Levy finds that alliance formation is not correlated with war, and, conversely, is often correlated with peace. While the author allows that conflict has often

followed alliance formation, which likely has given rise to the popular association between the two phenomena, he finds this relationship to be spurious given preexisting variables that suggest the onset of conflict—or, rather, that alliance formation is also a result of these factors rather than a causal factor.

However, in contrast to investigations conducted by Li and Thompson as well as Levy, Walt's explorations of alliance formation and alignment are concerned with a broader understanding of the phenomenon, especially with an eye toward understanding alliance formation in those realms where balance of power theory appears to be limiting. Noting an increased resistance to Waltz's balance of power theories (Walt recommends Robert O. Keohane's *Neorealism and Its Critics*, which provides an erudite, contemporaneous discussion of the neorealist revival sparked by Waltz), Walt seeks to empirically test neorealist theories of alliance formation in a case study featuring Iran, Türkiye, India, and Pakistan as test cases of the phenomenon.[12] Through this analysis, Walt argues that evidence of balancing was strongly reinforced, thereby evincing and validating the balance of power theory of alliance formation associated with Waltz. Walt takes this further in his 1990 treatise on alliance formation, *The Origins of Alliances*, at once synthesizing and expanding on his own analysis of alignment based on the balance of power theorizing expressed by Waltz.[13] Yet, although Walt's arguments are compelling, they gloss over the vagaries of endogenous and regime dynamics that yield particular outcomes. How are threat assessments generated? Are they uniform from state to state? How does that affect alliance formation and alignment?

By the same measure, Walt's empirical analyses offer much for the predisposed positivist, but they might not satisfy those with a more circumspect understanding of the neorealist tradition. Walt's empirical tests do not contend with the most compelling critiques of Waltz's framework (or the neorealist, positivist traditions, writ large) given those critiques' implicit interrogation of empiricism as an adequate or faithful means of properly understanding international relations dynamics. That is obviously not necessarily fatal, as his contributions are classics within the literature for good reason, but it does fall prey to the same blind spots to which other neorealist empirical models have succumbed. To put a finer point on it, Walt may have successfully reinforced the balancing hypothesis by finding it consistent with its own internal logic, but he did not fully ask why states balance in one way with a perceived threat and not another way or to another threat, real or imagined. That is perhaps the more burdensome crux of the debate, and an aspect of which Walt fails to appreciably engage.

However, this gap in alliance formation literature is not wholly vacant. While perhaps askance from the dominant tradition articulated by Waltz and elaborated on by Walt, other positivist treatments of alliance formation that show some innovation in examining some of the nonmaterial or at least intervening factors do exist. James D. Morrow, also bemoaning the extant gaps in alliance formation literature, proposes that the conventional "capability integration" prism for understanding alliances is inadequate for describing most alliance formation phenomena.[14] Instead, he offers an alternative where tradeoffs are made between "autonomy" and security in an asymmetrical relationship, versus the classical view of alliances as a kind of common pool of roughly symmetrical security "investments" (note the

materialist nomenclature). In Morrow's formulation, a primate or leading power may extend asymmetrical security benefits to a minor power in exchange for greater freedom of action; the junior partner, meanwhile, submits to ceding some measure of its sovereignty in exchange for its own kind of autonomy through the flexibility and freedom that come with security benefits.

Morrow's observations are a more convincing means of describing the prevailing, or at least the most well-known, cases of alignment today. For example, in many respects, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is very much an expression of this asymmetry, whereby the United States primarily, and a mere handful of other powers secondarily, constitute the vast bulk of capability, but the alliance extends far beyond that core to hinterlands that provide NATO with increased flexibility as well as a common space of relatively institutionalized norms and predictable strategic actions. This is an interesting approach to the "why" of alliance formation, but it also suggests that a state's perception of its threat set, security, capabilities, or the benefits of autonomy are potentially highly variables. One could even suggest, from a certain perspective, that Morrow's contributions offer a quasi-behavioralist view of alliance formation.

Glenn H. Snyder's contributions to neorealist alliance theorizing also hint at the panoply of intervening variables that animate alignment and alliance formation.[15] According to Snyder, alliance formation is "the product of systemic anarchy, strength inequalities and conflicts and common interests among the states, and a bargaining process."[16] In Snyder's exploration, capability differences between states, tradeoffs between autonomy and security, and the range of possibilities between alliance and its alternatives

lend themselves to a bargaining process that contributes to varying levels of alignment and potential alliance formation. Snyder further blends both social psychological theories of coalition formation and game theory in a series of case studies in European history before World War I.

Snyder posits "inherent value" as an aspect of bargaining in alliance formation, which is presented almost as a unit of marginal utility and is factored as such in the way his model is presented. However, this terminology and process is also riven with qualitative, ideational aspects and is noted as such where case studies do not entirely comport with his proposed model, such as a potential scarcity of alternatives by which a bargaining range might be established and where elite actors will miscalculate as a result. Snyder's musings on these softer variables point directly to the notion that nonmaterial factors are not only salient but also potentially pivotal in alignment, alliance formation, and their management.

Increased interest in recent years in some of the more qualitative aspects of alliance formation reveals a growing acceptance of nonmaterial variables as worthwhile contributions to alliance theory. Brian Lai and Dan Reiter empirically test the notion that regime type is strongly associated with alliance formation; or, as is often described colloquially, that democracies ally with other democracies and autocracies with other autocracies (i.e., an extrapolation of Immanuel Kant's democratic peace theory).[17] They find some relationship, though notably only after 1945, and no greater tendency between democracies as between autocracies, potentially suggesting that regime affinity, rather than the powers of liberalism, may be mechanisms for cooperation. Notably, they do find that in addition to regime type, "distance,

learning, threat, and common culture" also affect alliance behavior, but not trade.[18]

Anessa L. Kimball proposes that alliance behavior and conflict initiation are not only intricately linked, given the overlap in factors that shape both decisions, but particularly so by variables such as power and regime type.[19] Understandably, the typology of regime plays a major role in demonstrating (or not) alliance formation as well as, relatedly, conflict initiation. Like Lai and Reitner, Kimball proposes that regime type is at least moderately influential in predicting alliance formation. These examinations, as well as the increasingly robust literature examining alliance and regime typology, introduce endogenous—and therefore inherently multivariate—qualities to the process of interstate cooperation and alliance formation.

Regime type also receives notable attention from Douglas M. Gibler and Scott Wolford, who argue that previous evidence of regime-associated alliance formation is incorrect or misleading due to issues of research design.[20] Specifically, where alliance *formation* per se is the dependent variable, the authors find that democratic dyads are actually "unlikely to ally."[21] By contrast, when the dependent variable is an existing alliance, democratic dyads are, in fact, likely to be aligned. This is explainable by the rapid growth of alliances in the post-1945 period, which occurred in connection to relatively few actual pacts (and perhaps, reducibly, to the bipolar dynamics of the era). However, the authors found that autocracies in these alliances tended to democratize, showing that political transition may be an outcome of these alliances. This contribution highlights the even more explicit endogenous factor of politics (and political transition as a dependent variable) as relevant aspects of alliance formation.

Gibler goes even further down the interpretivist rabbit hole in his investigation of alliance formation and reputation—the latter being a phenomenon that is fundamentally inseparable from questions of behavior, psychology, and culture.[22] Using alliance formation as a test case, Gibler coded a series of historical cases and measured them against a quotient of state capabilities; in his results, he finds that reputation does have an observable effect on alliance formation. By almost any theoretical reckoning, reputation is an especially subjective concept that could be observed differently depending on the observer and the observed. In a similar vein, the impetus for alliance formation on reputation speaks to a state's internalized understanding (at the decision-making level) of the second state, contributing to (or detracting from) alliance formation.

According to a critical mass of literature, and certainly in more recent waves of inquiry, the *quality* of alliance formation—factors that may include regime type, asymmetries of exchange and capability, reputation, reliability, and interests, among others—is a crucial element all its own. In a similar vein, Alastair Smith uses game theory modeling to address questions of alliance formation, conflict, and reliability, building on the work of past empirical investigations, of the kind supplied by Levy in 1981.[23] In contrast to other studies, however, Smith concludes that prevailing inquiries into the relationships between alliance formation and conflict is wrong, or at least reductive, in that he finds that the quality of alliance formation is an independent variable.

While alliance formation "affects the behavior of aggressors and targets in a predictable manner," Smith describes the aggregate effect as "ambiguous" because a defensive alliance both decreases the likelihood of an

attack while also increasing the likelihood of armed resistance, while an offensive alliance both decreases the likelihood of resistance while increasing the likelihood of an attack.[24] Similarly, Smith's model shows that a reliable alliance is less likely to be attacked than an unreliable alliance, which produces a sampling bias in estimating actual reliability. Meanwhile, costly alliances form between states with a commonality of interests, which Smith finds to be true to the expected utility literature as he notes was primarily posited by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita.[25]

Smith's findings, though rooted in the language of empiricism and utility, also speak to a distinct strain of interpretivism animating state actors precisely because the macro model is unable to account for the quality of alliance formation—their intent, reliability, and the definition of what constitutes a critical mass of common interests. This suggests a behavioralist interpretation, or at least a variant of it, that might be better satisfied with a cultural approach to alliance formation.

Strategic Culture: A Timely Approach?

Despite the neorealist bias to a materialist, utilitarian framework of international relations, there is a clear tendency at least among certain quarters of positivist-leaning scholarship that embraces behavioral and even cultural explanations of interstate relations. Yet, although such nonmaterial factors are increasingly considered, are they being appreciably and accurately measured? While methods aimed to capture sociological and cultural data are in no short supply in the social sciences, they are only fitfully associated with the neorealist or even positivist schools of thought, instead being more broadly understood as an outgrowth of interpretivist traditions. As the TAG

trilateral cooperation case study later discusses, this can be an empowering mechanism for understanding international relations phenomena that are not entirely explicable through materialist factors.

Yet, strategic culturalism offers a potential bridge between positivist approaches to politics and the increasingly acknowledged human dimension of international relations scholarship. Conversely to the neorealist approach, which casts states as functional undifferentiated units seeking to maximize utility, a strategic cultural paradigm accepts the role that the accumulated weight of historical, social, and cultural processes may have on the prevailing norms and mores of a given political elite. Strategic culture can and has been projected simplistically and is subject to many of the same problems that have plagued other political assessments of culture—as immovable, immutable, or otherwise inflexible to shifts in circumstances, technology, or other such variables that would be assigned greater weight in a neorealist calculation. However, strategic culture may be better considered a prism for understanding state action rather than some competing theoretical model, or as an overriding motivating or causal force.

Indeed, political science's tendency to take certain cues from economics (and particularly in the North American traditions) might be seen in this case as a worthy clarion call for incorporating the human dimension, given the dismal science's growing appreciation for and linkages to behavioralism. Notably, the growing subfield of behavioral economics is mooted not as some kind of a rejection of neoclassical economics principles or the standard economic model but instead as seeking to modify assumptions "in the direction of greater psychological realism," as put by Colin F. Camerer, George Loewenstein, and Matthew Rabin.[26] Camerer and

Loewenstein also note that introducing psychological principles in economics is hardly a radical proposition, given that no actual injunction exists in neoclassical economics to people's divergent, psychologically, or socially informed approaches to utility maximization. Or, to put it another way in their words, "there is nothing in core neoclassical theory that specifies that people should not care about fairness, that they should weight risky outcomes in a linear fashion, or that they must discount the future exponentially at a constant rate."[27] Perhaps the time has come for a more explicit culturalist approach to international relations that is not wholly divorced from empiricism, even if it is more fundamentally attuned to the role of social constructs in the phenomena under study.

In his examination, John Glenn proposes the potential for potential synergy between strategic culturalism and neorealism.[28] Not unlike the point posed by Camerer, Loewenstein, and Rabin, Glenn notes that while utility optimization may be a tenet of neorealist thought, Waltz takes no position on the assumption that states are fundamentally rational. Citing Brian Rathbun's discussion of neoclassical realism and its discontents, the authors point out that "Waltzian neorealism takes a neutral stand toward the impact of ideational factors on state's behavior."[29] It is in the neoclassical realist stream of thought that domestic factors are increasingly allowed as potential causal properties. With this letter of marque in hand, Glenn highlights the growing emphasis in international relations theory to the cultural dimension and suggests that strategic culture shares overlapping methodological space that could be applied to realist analyses.

Glenn posits four conceptions of strategic culture, which vary in their compatibility to realism: *epiphenomenal*, in which strategic culture is used to

explain gaps in expected outcomes as predicted by neorealism; *conventional constructivist*, in which states are cast with "contingent generalizations" with "norms and culture as alternative explanatory factors"; *post-structuralist*, in which events are heavily influenced by cultural discourses and social agents and typically not generalizable; and *interpretivist*, which concerns itself with cultural observations that tend to be understood as inherently unique.[30] It is only the first two conceptions that Glenn supposes any significant collaboration with realism could exist, and only one—constructivism—in which it might do so as something akin to an equal partner.

Glenn's formulation of strategic culture is a useful survey of its constituent "tribes," broadly understood, although his is not the only taxonomy used to frame strategic culturalism. Alastair Iain Johnson has provided perhaps the most well-known framing device for strategic cultural thought, in which he organizes it along a temporal spectrum.[31] In this view, Johnson seeks to provide an updated primer of strategic culture by outlining its definitions, the chief contours of its debates, and what he categorizes as three "generations" of strategic cultural thought. He notes that strategic culture was developed, perhaps crudely in its inception, in opposition to neorealist, objectivist interpretations of state behavior as rational and empirical. It is not, however, a total rejection of state rationality, but an acknowledgement that cultural factors may play a role in shaping a state's perceptibility and receptivity to changing circumstances. Therefore, while it can be rational, Johnson posits that it is least compatible with game rationality, in which the best choice can be objectively assessed and employed.

According to Johnson, the first generation of strategic cultural thought emerged in the 1970s surrounding the issue of U.S. and Soviet strategic thought related to nuclear issues. Developed primarily as a policy assessment, as opposed to being a deliberative theoretical contribution, Jack L. Snyder's work on Soviet strategic doctrine is a notable example of this first-generation use of strategic culture.[32] First-generation examinations of strategic culture were heavily oriented to explanations of U.S. and Soviet strategic calculations, particularly regarding the question of nuclear first use, in which broad assumptions about Soviet historical memory—observed from afar—were transmuted to formulate an assessment of strategic culture. According to Johnson, the second generation (mid-1980s) explored the gulf between behavior and strategic thought or motives, such as crafting justifications for strategies that appeared unmoored from operational considerations. The third generation (1990s) focuses more on conceptualization of ideational variables and more sharply divorces behavior—and associated deterministic tendencies—from being especially useful in understanding strategic culture. It is also less inherently historical, with some in this generation explicitly rejecting historical factors as especially crucial in strategic cultural formation.

Johnson's typology might be described as the dominant organizing mechanism in strategic cultural thought, to the extent that one can in a space that is habitually qualified as highly fragmented and lacking a unified theoretical core. However, Johnson's approach, and particularly his dismissive approach toward first-generation scholarship (and concomitant favor toward the third generation, to which he admits membership), struck a chord and elicited a vigorous response from those same first-generation strategic

culturalists who, with no small amount of irony, may have hardened and validated the very intergenerational divisions that Johnson's framing discussion originally mooted.

Colin S. Gray, named by Johnson as part of the cohort comprising the first generation of strategic cultural theorists, responds to Johnson's survey of the terrain with an invitation to debate.[33] In particular, he objects to Johnson's insistence of separating behavior from strategic culture. While acknowledging the sympathetic rationale for doing so, Gray cautions that behavior in the strategic cultural realm must be, at some level, a reflection of that same domestic culture. That said, Gray is careful to point out that culture cannot be everything (and therefore to be nothing), but that as a shaping mechanism it cannot be discounted. Another aspect is his rejection of historical bases for strategic cultural formation; convincingly, Gray argues that a strategic culture shorn of history hardly constitutes anything that could be recognized as cultural. In this way, Gray advances a far more anthropological view of strategic culture, right down to the role of the researcher as a kind of participant observer who records behaviors and organizes them in a pattern of understanding. Strategic culture fits within that realm, he argues, even if it is perhaps more arcane than the typical cultural subject. At the same time, Gray's modified first-generation strategic culturalism appears to be more compatible with realist traditions, while Johnson's third generation seems more properly grouped with poststructuralist and interpretivist modes of strategic culturalism, to use Glenn's taxonomy.

Bradley S. Klein, whom resides in Johnson's second generation, offers a radical perspective of strategic culture that emanates from "political

ideologies of public discourse that help define occasions as worthy of military involvement," which in turn affect the state's actions on the geopolitical level—including its choice of friends, alliances, and alignments.[34] Klein advances an argument that strategic culture is a reflection of endogenously produced constraints that help define the range of dominant policy alternatives, which are later interpreted as the "realities" of international relations. He applies this view to an assessment of American strategic culture, which he reduces to the concept of power projection, and expounds on it as the product of certain geographic, historical, political, and socioeconomic forces (i.e., culture) and how that strategic culture was exported during the postwar period, including the ways by which it interacted with alliance commitments. Klein's strategic cultural analysis at once contributes to understandings of what strategic culture is and interrogates U.S. foreign policy in the critical theoretical tradition. Notably, Klein offers an analytical approach that applies the strategic culturalist framework in an argument regarding contemporaneous politics.

Representative of more recent scholarship, Iver B. Neumann and Henrikki Heikka offer a different analytical approach to using strategic culture in international relations.[35] Reflecting on the state of the strategic cultural field, including the intergenerational typology offered by Johnson and subject to repeated rounds of debate, they note that the prevailing view of culture in strategic cultural discourses are tethered to outdated notions of culture that are not recognizable in prevailing, current understandings of culture in anthropology and sociology. In reconciling strategic culture to more recent understandings of culture, Neumann and Heikka cast strategic culture as transnationally nested and constitutive of the interplay between grand

strategy on one hand and doctrines, civil-military relations, and procurement on the other hand.

As the strategic cultural approach has matured in its theoretical underpinnings and methodological utility, the positivist-dominant international relations field has seen greater demand for nonmaterial, human-dimensioned analyses as a means of mediating between realist structuralism and the finicky details of process. Strategic culture appears to have a role to play in international relations theory more generally, and certainly in addressing those extant gaps in alliance formation theory, which continue to largely depend on variously unsatisfying adaptations of Waltzian neorealism, which are at best agnostic to the internal processes that have come to be so increasingly acknowledged as critical variables in international relations dynamics.

Theorizing Black Sea Trilateral Cooperation

All this said, attaching questions of alliance formation and strategic culture to a specific region such as the Black Sea, and a particular notional phenomenon in that region—TAG trilateral alignment—asks a more complicated question. Or, at least, it demands a more finely tuned appreciation for regional, idiosyncratic dynamics. Yet, those demands of process and more directed interpretations of culture, as described by Neumann and Heikka, make a regional test case not only possible but more ideal.

Given that scholarly investigations of alliance dynamics in the Black Sea region are particularly thin, there is a clear place for a directed research program into that space, particularly given the ongoing development of an increasingly integrated trilateral space.

Conventional conceptions of international relations phenomena would predict that economic and security interests as well as proximity justify a robust Turkish role in the Black Sea region, including in the Caucasus. While there is evidence that Ankara's South Caucasus role has expanded as of late, this followed a relatively longer period of more modest attention paid to its proverbial backyard.[36] Because of the comparatively outsized role that the Euro-Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East factor into Turkish foreign policy thinking, some analysts see the South Caucasus as occupying a more peripheral role in Ankara's foreign policy.[37]

At the same time, even if there is a relative lack of deliberative policymaking toward the South Caucasus, the extent of Türkiye's economic interests in the South Caucasus as a supplier and transit corridor for goods and energy has a much longer history.[38] Taking this wider view of engagement, Türkiye's role in the South Caucasus is not only growing but has been significant for some time. Spurred by foundational bilateral ties between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, the addition of Georgia as a friendly, connecting partner is a rational, explainable development.[39] By dint of Georgia's geographic position connecting the two Turkic allies, shared interests in joint transit and hydrocarbon infrastructure, and at least initially shared foreign policy biases favouring Euro-Atlantic states and structures, trilateral cooperation on some level could be regarded as a predictable structural outcome.

While TAG trilateral integration could be described as at least partially conditioned on energy infrastructure that gradually came online in the early to mid-2000s, Turkish foreign policy by the mid-2000s was well primed to play a larger role in South Caucasus affairs. The *Strategic Depth* doctrine articulated

by Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu cast the South Caucasus, along with other historical Ottoman hinterlands, as sources of strategic and political influence for contemporary Turkish grand strategy.[40] Meanwhile, Georgian identity-formed foreign policy priorities emphasizing Euro-Atlantic integration, and the elevating role that TAG trilateral cooperation plays in that regard, made it an eager partner to Türkiye and Azerbaijan.[41]

However, trilateral cooperation appears to have since long outpaced the scale and stride of interest-based considerations among the three states. Previously ascendant economic growth in all three states has been replaced with stable economic instability in Türkiye, energy price-conditioned economic and monetary insecurity in Azerbaijan, and stabler but exogenously vulnerable conditions in Georgia. The idea of the southern energy corridor as a means of extricating the Black Sea region from poverty and conflict has not been realized and is arguably structurally incapable of meeting such lofty expectations. Critically, the three states have also shown remarkable degrees of evident strategic divergence in recent years, as their foreign policy orientations have drifted in otherwise seemingly incompatible directions. For example, Türkiye has variously adopted Euro-Atlantic-moored policies during periods of insecurity, but on the whole it has sought to carve out and project an independent foreign policy agenda befitting its stated ambition as a separate pole of power. Azerbaijan has increasingly aligned with Russia at the exclusion of its traditional "multivectored" policy orientation that balanced ties with the United States and NATO, likely in pursuit of its strategic agenda in the South Caucasus. And Georgia, while remaining formally and even by some measures emphatically and institutionally pro-West, has engaged in a stridently illiberal and, particularly since 2022, anti-Western and

antidemocratic direction of travel. And yet, trilateral cooperation has not only continued apace, but by some measures it has intensified between the three states in recent years.

The puzzle of TAG trilateral cooperation's staying power deserves attention because it speaks to an aspect of alliance formation yet unaccounted. Skyler J. Cranmer, Bruce A. Desmarais, and Justin H. Kirkland propose a network-based theory of alliance formation, which expands beyond the dyadic composition as an optimal element of alliance systems.[42] Notably, they posit that a "triadic closure"—or a relationship formation between three states—produces a "synergy effect" greater than the sum of their parts.[43] This is rooted in the assumption that a triangle is closed between three states; the authors posit two states unallied to each other but each to a third as closing the triangle, with a resultant alliance that is otherwise stronger than a typical dyadic arrangement. This builds on emergent alliance theory, particularly from Zeev Maoz, Lesley G. Terris, Ranan D. Kuperman, Ilan Talmud, and Cranmer Warren, empirically testing their claims using a "temporal exponential random graph model."[44]

However, while triadic closure is an attractive explanation for the utility of trilateral alignments writ large, it is neither necessarily predictive of the Black Sea context, where interests-based relations between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are generally robust but ultimately do not explain expanding ties. As such, the material interests case for trilateral cooperation appears, at least at the moment, insufficient. However, intervening variables of nonmaterial factors, ascertained through a strategic cultural approach, could provide greater clarity into the trilateral process and provide a broader theoretical test case for alliance formation.

While material factors may establish or fortify certain conditions conducive for alignment and potential alliance formation, or at least possible bargaining among alternatives in Snyder's formulation, they do not appear to be necessarily operative in Black Sea trilateral cooperation. Instead, a strategic culturalist approach might consider how elite prerogatives in policymaking may influence the definitions of *inherent value* in alignment and alliance formation; prevailing elite sensibilities about that country's role may affect and help define the range of acceptable alternatives, in which case certain alignments are increasingly acceptable or desirable.

Considering its emphases, as earlier discussed, strategic culture offers a nuanced and useful framework for understanding and predicting the persistence and evolution of TAG trilateral cooperation. Unlike dominant materialist approaches that primarily, if not exclusively, emphasize tangible factors such as energy resources or military capabilities, strategic culture prioritizes the historical narratives, elite perceptions, and shared norms that shape state behavior. These cultural and ideational dimensions provide valuable insights into the dynamics of TAG cooperation, particularly its ability to endure and adapt in the face of shifting material conditions or geopolitical challenges.

A key predictive element of strategic culture is its emphasis on historical narratives, or historical memory as an input into perceptions of identity, ideation, and conceptions of national interests. For example, TAG states share a history marked by external threats and struggles for sovereignty, from Ottoman and Persian dominance to Soviet-era alignments. These historical experiences shape collective memory and strategic outlooks, fostering a cultural predisposition toward regional cooperation. This is

evident in how TAG states consistently emphasize territorial integrity and sovereignty in their joint declarations, reflecting a shared understanding of regional security challenges rooted in their historical experiences. By invoking these narratives, strategic culture potentially predicts that TAG cooperation will persist, especially when external pressures, such as Russian aggression, reinforce these collective memories.

Elite perceptions also play a critical role in shaping TAG's trilateral dynamics, as strategic culture highlights the influence of policymakers' beliefs and strategic preferences. For instance, Turkish leaders often frame the region as a natural extension of Türkiye's historical sphere of influence, while Azerbaijani elites view TAG cooperation as central to their strategic positioning in the Caucasus. For Georgia, trilateral cooperation aligns with its status quo aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration and counters regional isolation. The alignment of these elite-driven strategic preferences, despite differences in immediate goals, reinforces the durability of TAG cooperation and offers a predictive lens into how it may evolve under varying geopolitical scenarios.

Finally, strategic culture's focus on nonmaterial factors, such as trust, reputation, and shared norms, underscores the resilience of TAG cooperation beyond material incentives. While initial trilateral mechanisms may have been motivated by energy-related interests, their continued institutionalization reflects a deeper cultural commitment to regional alignment. This resilience suggests that even as material benefits fluctuate or diminish, TAG cooperation is likely to persist, shaped by enduring strategic narratives and mutual expectations. In this way, strategic culture serves as a dynamic

predictive tool, illuminating how ideational and cultural dynamics sustain and adapt TAG cooperation in a volatile international system.

The persistence of Black Sea trilateral cooperation highlights the importance of integrating strategic culture into alliance formation theories. This case demonstrates how cultural factors, such as shared historical narratives and elite perceptions, sustain alignments even amid diverging material interests. Strategic culture, at its core, is a means of explaining externalized state behavior from domestic sources, but perhaps as a way of better integrating nonmaterial, ideational, and elite perceptions into positivist frameworks without a wholesale shift to the paradigmatic contingency of constructivism.[45] Strategic culture may be particularly useful in those cases where state actions are perceived as disconnected or otherwise askance from conventional interpretations of utility maximalization. As explored above, a strategic culturalist model of alliance formation would show how elite actors' views of their country's interests, actions, and relationships might interface in such a way where trilateral cooperation is more plausible or even necessary. While this discussion surveys the literature and theoretical accoutrements of strategic culture in TAG trilateral cooperation, it would be well-aligned with additional analysis testing and considering the "substantiveness" of the trilateral cooperation enterprise and the strategic cultures of the states involved. In aggregate, a strategic culturalist model of alliance formation may explain the puzzle of the trilateral cooperation's provenance and development. Further research can additionally explore potential methodologies for this strategic culturalist approach, as well as a discussion of certain assumptions, processes, and potential issues in developing a strategic culturalist, qualitative model.

[1] In a report prepared for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Jeannie L. Johnson defines *strategic culture* as "that set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives." Jeannie L. Johnson, "Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct," in *Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum Project*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2006), 122–66.

[2] Although Türkiye and Azerbaijan have a formal defense pact, TAG trilateral cooperation is not a mutual defense treaty, which is the gold standard of alliance designations. However, it is also not the only one, as discussed later in this article. Arguably, the level of development of ties between the three states could be considered an incipient kind of alliance formation, or particularly strong interstate alignment or cooperation. Further, Georgia has bilateral ties with each of Türkiye and Azerbaijan that might also be independently described as such, including a mutual defense policy document with Türkiye, the author has been told, with some tie-ins to preexisting treaty documentation.

[3] In particular, the production of Caspian hydrocarbons having hit their peak in 2010, to be increasingly replaced by increased, but nonetheless limited, natural gas volumes.

[4] See, for example, Charles King, "The Wider Black Sea Region in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21st Century: Strategic, Economic, and Energy Perspectives*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Gerhard Mangott (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2008), 1–23. This discusses at length what makes a "region" and how the act of regional identification is a political act and region-making.

[5] *Materialist factors* refer to tangible elements such as military capabilities, economic resources, and geographic proximity, which are central to neorealist and neoliberal theories emphasizing power and utility in state behavior. *Nonmaterialist factors*, by contrast, encompass cultural norms, historical narratives, and elite perceptions, as highlighted by strategic culture and constructivist approaches, which argue that ideational elements shape and constrain how states interpret and act upon material realities.

[6] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[7] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 167.

[8] Edward V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955); Inis L. Claude Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), part IV; Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley, 1957); and Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540.

[9] Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," 46.

[10] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, part IV. See also Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, "Relativization Strategies in Wappo," *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1978): 106–13, https://doi.org/10.3765/bls.v4i0.2214.

[11] Jack S. Levy, "Alliance Formation and War Behavior: An Analysis of the Great Powers, 1495–1975," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25, no. 4 (1981): 581–613, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200278102500402.

[12] Stephen M. Walt, "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia," *International Organization* 42, no. 2 (1988): 275–316, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300032823. See also Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[13] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[14] James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904–33, https://doi.org/10.2307/2111499.

[15] Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[16] Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 78.

[17] Brian Lai and Dan Reiter, "Democracy, Political Similarity, and International Alliances, 1816–1992," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 2 (2000): 203–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002700044002003.

[18] Lai and Reiter, "Democracy, Political Similarity, and International Alliances, 1816–1992," 204.

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[21] Gibler and Wolford, "Alliances, Then Democracy," 137.

[22] Douglas M. Gibler, "The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (2008): 426–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707310003.

[23] Alastair Smith, "Alliance Formation and War," *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (December 1995): 405–25, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600800.

[24] Smith, "Alliance Formation and War," 418.

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[27] Camerer, Loewenstein, and Rabin, *Advances in Behavioral Economics*, 3.

[28] John Glenn, "Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration?," *International Studies Review* 11, no. 3 (September 2009): 523–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2009.00872.x.

[29] Camerer, Loewenstein, and Rabin, *Advances in Behavioral Economics*, 3–4. See also Brian Rathbun, "A Rose by Any other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism," *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 294–321, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098917.

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[31] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 32–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119.

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[42] Skyler J. Cranmer, Bruce A. Desmarais, and Justin H. Kirkland, "Toward a Network Theory of Alliance Formation," *International Interactions* 38, no. 3 (2012): 295–324, https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2012.677741.

[43] Another way to describe *triadic closure* refers to the formation of close ties between three states, where connections between all three create a stable alignment.

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