

Turkish Policy Toward the Caucasus

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Since the onset of the changes experienced in the worldwide geopolitical climate from the late 1980s onwards, Turkey has found itself at the center of the Eurasian region, a region that has become the focal point of global geopolitics. In this context, Turkey has been cited as an important actor because of its strong historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic bonds with the newly independent states of Eurasia. The emergence of eight independent states to Turkey's northeast at the end of the Cold War arguably enlarged Turkey's role in the world, and presented Turkey with both opportunities and potential risks in the region.

Adapting to the New Environment

Having based its post-World War II foreign and security policies on the strategic importance for the West of its location *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union, Turkey, at least initially, hardly welcomed the end of the Cold War. As the subject of the continued relevance of NATO in the post-Cold War world order was opened up for discussion, Turkey suddenly found itself in a "security limbo." While the emergence of liberal democracies in Eastern Europe created a buffer zone between Western Europe and Russia, Turkey still felt threatened by the lingering uncertainties regarding its immediate neighborhood.

It also became clear that Turkey could no longer follow its traditional foreign policy posture of non-involvement in regional problems. At this juncture, the emergence of newly independent states beyond its Caucasian border was a challenge that needed to be faced. Nevertheless, Turkey's response to the Soviet collapse during the late 1980s was, perhaps not surprisingly, somewhat cautious, especially at the outset when the status of the new republics was far from clear.

Since then, however, Turkish policy toward the Caucasus has changed dramatically, and after the USSR formally broke up in December 1991, the implementation of a new policy orientation in Turkey soon followed. Thus Turkey became the first country to recognize the independence of the new republics, recognizing Azerbaijan on December 9, and the rest on December 16. After recognition, Turkey also signed protocols with each of them, except Armenia, initiating diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level. As a result, by the end of 1991 Turkey had completely abandoned its Moscow-centered stance and had embarked on a program of active relations with the various Soviet successor states. Within the first year of independence alone, over 1170 Turkish delegations visited both the Caucasus and Central Asia, and in October 1992 Turkey hosted the presidents of

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the Turkic states in Istanbul for an inaugural Turkic Summit. Direct air connections and a satellite broadcast link have been established and, to facilitate these activities, the Turkish International Cooperation Agency was established in Ankara in January 1992.

While Turkey was aiming to take a more prominent role in the region, the fear that the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union could lead to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among the Muslims of Eurasia led to the West's promotion of Turkey as secular and democratic model of a Muslim state. Hence, as a result of growing self-confidence about its own potential and its political support in the West, Turkey felt ready to take advantage of the economic and political opportunities offered by the newly independent states of Eurasia.

Regional Rivalries

Despite all the promising signs, it quickly became clear that Turkey was neither capable of capitalizing on them nor alone in its bid to fill the power vacuum. On the contrary, the competition between the rival countries seeking influence in the rapidly changing Eurasian environment became a 21st-century replica of the "Great Game," with the Russian Federation, Turkey, Iran, and the U.S. (among others) envisioning themselves as key players. The competition among them took on economic, political, ideological, and religious dimensions, and thus produced various possibilities for widespread conflict.

From the Turkish perspective, the possibility of a military confrontation with either Iran or Russia provided ample concern. Turkey was concerned that Iran would attempt to influence the identification of Muslim people throughout the Caucasus, an apprehension shared at the time by the Russian Federation and the West generally. Iran, on the other hand, worried that Turkey's active role in the region might create a pan-Turkic hegemony on its borders. Thus, a competition ensued briefly between the two opposing models of political development for the Turco-Muslim peoples of Eurasia: the secular model of Turkey with its political pluralism, and the Islamist model supported by Iran. It soon became clear, however, that neither country had enough political clout and economic power to back up its ambitions.

While Turkey became the first country to extend recognition to Azerbaijan, Iran did not conceal its concern over the Turkish action, accusing Turkey of pan-Turkism and the West of instigating such sentiments. Fears were expressed that the Turkish recognition would encourage an independent Azerbaijan to lay claim to a "greater Azerbaijan." The existence of about 20 million Azeris in Iran, out of a population of roughly 60 million, makes Iran edgy and raises fears that Iranian Azerbaijan might get restless after the independence of the Soviet Azerbaijan. The concern was exacerbated earlier by the nationalist rhetoric of President Elchibey in Azerbaijan. Though Turkey never played to such sentiments, and Azerbaijan after Aliyev's rise to power has stayed clear of the issue, Iran still dreads the

possibility that another nationalist leadership might come to power in Azerbaijan. In such a case, Iran would inevitably see Turkey as the beneficiary in an evolving set of relationships that directly affect Iran's territorial integrity, and might put itself on a path of high-stakes conflict with Turkey.

Although Turkey and Iran share similar concerns about the continuation of the Karabakh conflict, there are differences between them about how to solve the problem. While Turkey prefers to have the conflict dealt with within the OSCE, Iran, which also has a large Armenian minority, has taken a more direct approach by negotiating with, and mediating between, the two Caucasian republics. While Iran's bilateral attempts to solve the problem created concerns in Turkey about a possible increase in Iranian influence in the region, Iran in turn has been concerned about Turkey's cooperation with the U.S. to solve the problem, which was seen as paving the way for "growing American influence in the region."²

While Turkey was locked in an influence competition with Iran, at the same time it did not wish to alarm Moscow by exerting too much influence in the region. While Russia initially welcomed Turkish influence in the region as a counterweight against Iranian dominated pan-Islamism, those views have long since been modified, and Russia, becoming increasingly concerned about Turkish intentions, has become more aggressive in its assertion of its own rights in its "near abroad." Hence, after a brief period of self-isolation, Russia has moved to re-establish its place in the region as a dominant actor. As part of this move, political, economic, and military pressures have been used extensively. Moscow even argued that stability in the Caucasus would be threatened without a Russian presence in Azerbaijan, implicitly threatening that if the latter did not accept Russian troops and grant oil concessions, Russia could support Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan.³ These developments put Russia and Turkey on opposite sides, as the latter unequivocally supported Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia.

Turkey, however, realizing Russian sensitivities regarding ethnic strife in the Caucasus, has repeatedly reassured Moscow of its opposition to any further fragmentation of Russia, and of its support for the CIS's stability and integrity.⁴ On the other hand, Turkey stood firm in its opposition to Russia's wish to review the Conventional Forces Europe Treaty arrangements in the Caucasus. In the end, Russia was able to convince the West to modify the treaty and, despite Turkish protests, returned many of its military forces it had previously withdrawn from the Caucasus. As a result, since 1995 Turkey has become more conscious of the

² Velayeti's speech in a conference cited in Korkmaz Haktanır, "Developments in Central Asia and Turkish-Iranian Relations", *Middle East Business and Banking*, June 1992, 11.

³ Statement was made by the Russian Frontier Forces Commander in August 1994; see Carol Migdalowitz, "Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict," *CRS Issue Brief* (Washington, DC: The Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, updated April 12, 1995), 13.

⁴ For example, see "Turkish PM Demirel Visits Moscow: Useful, Constructive Talks Expected", *FBIS-SOV*, May 27, 1992, 15-16.

dangers of confrontation, and has adopted a policy stressing that the benefits of cooperation with Russia are still greater than those of cooperation with the rest of the former Soviet republics.

Although Turkey has chosen to avoid involvement in any way in the conflicts within Russian territory, the quest of the Chechens for independence has rapidly become a sore point in Turkish-Russian relations. The crisis has been especially critical for Turkey, not only because Turkish public opinion has shown great sympathy for the Chechen cause, but also because the crisis has displayed similarities to Turkey's Kurdish problem. While criticizing Russia for its excessive use of force in Chechnya, Turkey has been quite careful to state that the matter is an internal affair of the Russian Federation.⁵ Nonetheless, Turkey's relations with Russia worsened earlier with the Russian claim that the Chechens were obtaining assistance and volunteers from Turkey.⁶ Moreover, it was reported that the Russians were showing signs of supporting the secessionist Kurdish groups in Turkey in response to the alleged Turkish involvement in Chechnya.⁷ However, Turkey avoided direct involvement and the issue subsided after the 1996 cease-fire between Russia and the Chechens. Turkey has carefully avoided any involvement since the second round of fighting started in October 1999.

Relations with Armenia

Turkey's relations with Armenia have been an especially delicate issue because of the legacy of distrust between the two nations and the historical baggage that they brought into the relationship. Although Turkey recognized Armenian independence on December 16, 1991, without any preconditions, the border between the two countries immediately became a source of controversy. It was originally drawn by a peace treaty signed between Turkey and the short-lived independent Armenian Republic in 1921, and confirmed later by the Soviet-Turkish treaty of 1921. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, as Turkey no longer shared a border with Russia, some members of the Armenian Parliament argued that Armenia should not recognize the borders established between Moscow and Ankara. Thus, in the spring of 1992, Turkey stipulated that it would not proceed to formalize diplomatic relations with Armenia.

Apart from the border issue, references in the Armenian Independence Declaration to "killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turkey in 1915," and Armenian efforts to obtain international recognition for these killings, created tension between the two countries. Although former Armenian President Ter-Petrosyan, recognizing the need to enhance his country's relations with Turkey on a realistic basis,

⁵ *Briefing*, No. 1023, January 9, 1995, 7-8; and No. 1024, January 16, 1995, 10.

⁶ For public accusation from the Head of Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service on December 20, 1995, that volunteer fighters from Turkey were discovered in the Northern Caucasus, mainly in Chechnya, see *FBIS-SOV*, February 3, 1995, 71.

⁷ *Briefing*, No. 1039, May 1, 1995, 13; No. 1045, June 19, 1995, 13.

refrained from placing the issue on the agenda and thus offered an opening for improved relations, developments in the Caucasus (i.e. the Karabakh problem) have prevented further reconciliation between the two countries. With the advent of the nationalist Kocharian into power in Armenia in March 1997, the possibility of rapprochement between the two countries has been shelved for the time being.

In the meantime, Armenia's signing of a friendship and cooperation agreement with Russia in 1997, and allowing Russian forces to be stationed in the country, has put Armenia and Turkey on the opposite sides of the emerging loosely defined political alliances in the Caucasus—the Russian Federation, Armenia, and Iran on the one side, and the U.S., Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey on the other.

The Karabakh problem has been an important constraint on Turkish policy towards the Caucasus in general. It has presented unacceptable options for Turkey, with dangerous ramifications. There exists a longstanding public sympathy for the Azeris in Turkish public opinion, which has strongly encouraged the government to side with Azerbaijan, supporting even military intervention.⁸ The government, however, conscious that intervention might result in a deterioration of relations with both Russia and the U.S., has refrained from acting on these pressures and has chosen instead to mobilize an international response to Armenian attacks in Karabakh. Turkey has also displayed its awareness of the importance of the “Russian factor” to solving the conflict by seeking Russian cooperation, especially in the OSCE. However, when the matter of peace-keeping was discussed following the cease-fire between the warring parties on May 12, 1994, Turkey advocated for the deployment of a multinational force under OSCE supervision, and against Russian peacekeepers as suggested by Moscow. Turkey saw in this suggestion another attempt by Russia to exclude the rest of the world from the Caucasus.⁹

Although Turkey has thus far been able to remain clear of any direct military involvement in the conflict, the Karabakh issue firmly underscores the dilemmas that may face Turkey in its future efforts to maintain neutrality regarding ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet republics. Turkish policy during the conflict has aimed mainly at ensuring through political measures that this regional conflict does not escalate to a level that seriously threatens Turkish security, and thus compels it to intervene militarily. However, the conflict has also stopped the tentative moves from both sides of the Turkish-Armenian border to put an end to historic animosities. Although both sides seemed to agree on the need to overcome psychological barriers between themselves, developments in Karabakh have caused Turkish public opinion to press Ankara to speak out firmly against Armenian actions, and have thus put a halt to any process of reconciliation.

⁸ Among others, former president Turgut Özal argued that Turkey “had the right to intervene.” See *Financial Times Report on Turkey*, May 7, 1993, 5.

⁹ See *Milliyet*, February 25, 1995, 17; and May 8, 1995, 13.

Moreover, one of the by-products of the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus (i.e., Abkhazia, Chechnya, and Karabakh) has been a sense of resurgent ethnic identity among the more than six million Caucasian-origin Turkish citizens, the full significance of which is yet to emerge. Although they have so far focused more on the cultural sphere, in the future these citizens may yet radicalize and wish to play a more determining role in the future of the Caucasian people, thus bringing Turkey into conflict with the interests of the regional countries.

Relations with Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan was at the top of the list of nations with whom every expert on the Caucasus predicted Turkey would make most progress in its post-Cold War relations. The expectation proved correct, and Turkish-Azeri relations started off with a leap forward based on cultural, linguistic, and historic linkages as well as shared economic, political, and strategic interests. In time, Turkey has become the only country that consistently supported Azerbaijan in its struggle over Karabakh, risking its relations with Armenia and Russia along the way.

Although the harmonious relationship between the two countries established during the reign of President Elchibey was somewhat cooled down with Aliyev's rise to power in Azerbaijan, the cooperation continued and even expanded into various other domains. Apart from strategic cooperation against Russian attempts to re-establish its hegemony over the Caucasus, the two countries have been cooperating on Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) project, the possibility of transferring Azeri natural gas to Turkey, various cultural programs, and thriving trade, as well as on the establishing and training of the national army of Azerbaijan. Moreover, Aliyev's policy of avoiding alienation of Russia and Iran in the region while firmly cooperating with the West has helped Turkey move away from its earlier confrontational line with Russia, Iran, and Armenia.

Relations with Georgia

After the collapse of the USSR, Georgia has rapidly become one of Turkey's more important foreign policy partners in the post-Cold War era. Their relations have thrived on Georgian opposition to Russian dominance in the Caucasus, its support for the realization of the BTC project, and its willingness to cooperate with Turkey on wide variety of issues, from tourism to security. Turkey, in return, has been more than willing to extend its friendship and economic, political, and military support to Georgia, which offered Turkey a foothold in the Caucasus and a gateway to Central Asia.

In contrast to Russian meddling with ethnic issues in Georgia, Turkey's bipartisan approach to Abkhazian and Ossetian problems and its continuing reaffirmation of Georgian territorial integrity greatly helped to enhance the relationship, so much so that Turkey became the biggest trade partner of Georgia shortly after independence and, in the words of Georgian President Shevardnadze, a strategic

partner in the long run. In addition, starting with cooperation in military education, Turkey, under the PfP program, offered its advice and help in establishing the Georgian national army. Then the two countries moved on to cooperate in the restoration of the Marnauli airfield and the Vaziyani military base in Georgia after the withdrawal of Russian forces.

Recently, when Georgia was again put under pressure by Russia in the aftermath of the events of September 11, with accusations that it was harboring Chechen gunmen, Turkey, with American backing, was again forthcoming in its support. Finally, the arrival of American military advisers in Georgia in the wake of September 11 cemented Georgia's western orientation. This, together with the planned Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani trilateral security cooperation agreement, is poised to bring new dimensions to both bilateral relations and in a wider scale to Caucasian geopolitics.

Turkey's Interest in the Caspian and the Struggle for Pipelines

One of the peculiar features of the Caspian Basin is that the regional countries most interested in the early exploration and transportation of oil and natural gas are landlocked and have to rely on the goodwill of their neighbors to be able to export their petroleum. As each country has a preference about how the oil and natural gas should be transported to market, the issue assumes an international dimension. Today, Russia is still keenly interested in retaining its political influence in the Caspian Basin. In order to acquire this advantage, it has insisted that the northern pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan, to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk should be the main transit route for oil from the Caspian region. If Russia is successful, this will ensure Moscow's exclusive and strategic control over the region's resources.

Opposing Russian insistence on the northern route, the U.S. and Turkey as well as Georgia and Azerbaijan prefer a western route through Georgia to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Although there have been various projects developed to move Caspian energy resources to market, the main competition has been between these two routes. What is at stake is not only oil and gas transit revenues that both countries can extract from pipelines passing through their respective territories; more importantly, the pipeline network is one of the key factors in securing and maintaining influence throughout Eurasia.¹⁰

Although the shortest route for a pipeline from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean is through Armenia and Turkey, the unresolved Karabakh conflict makes this route difficult to realize. This, coupled with U.S. opposition to have pipelines run through Iran, leaves the Georgian option the only possible one for the western line. However, Georgia, too, is struggling with a number of internal con-

¹⁰ On this subject, see Mustafa Aydın, *New Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Causes of Instability and Predicament* (Ankara: Center for Strategic Research, 2000), 56-71.

flicts, which assumed new urgency with the developments in the region since the September 11 attacks on the U.S. As the U.S. has now firmly arrived on the Caucasus scene with its advisers in Georgia, we might expect a new turn of events within Georgia and a boost to the BTC project, which the U.S. has supported politically from the beginning.

If the BTC pipeline is built and put into operation, its main effect would be to weaken the Caspian states' economic and transportation dependence on Russia. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan would appear as new competitors to Russia in the export of oil and gas and, together with Georgia, would use the money thus obtained to enhance their political independence from Russia. The role of the Western states, whose oil and gas companies would provide the necessary investment, would increase, as would the role of Turkey.

Conclusions

The collapse of the USSR has been a mixed blessing for Turkey. While the century-old Soviet/Russian threat to Turkey's security has disappeared, the vacuum created by this departure in the Eurasian region has become a breeding ground on Turkey's borders for potential risks and threats to regional security.

While Turkey has traditionally avoided involvement in regional politics, it has been unavoidably drawn into the volatile new political environment of the Caucasus, where Armenia and Azerbaijan are locked in a potentially expandable conflict, where Georgian politics are highly unstable, and where Chechens fight to break away from the Russian Federation. For its part, Turkey, mindful of the disruptive impacts of sub-nationalism and ultra-nationalism, has been eager to promote the positive aspects of national formation in the region, making clear that transnational concepts based on Islam or pan-Turkism are not part of its policy *vis-à-vis* the states in the region.

We can now clearly see that Turkey is currently undergoing a dramatic shift in its traditional foreign policy, increasingly focusing on the Caucasus, along with the Balkans and the Middle East. Although Turkey has disavowed any intention of intervening militarily in inter-republican clashes in former Soviet territory, it is still conceivable that Turkish forces might be invited by these states to play the role of peacekeepers between or within them. In this context, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has already presented Turkey with a sense of the difficulties that it might encounter if it decides to engage in ethnic conflicts in the region.

The emergence of independent republics in the Caucasus represented a turning point in Turkey's regional role and policies. Turkey has become one of the important players in a region where it previously had only a marginal influence and no active involvement. Although economic and political conditions in the region are unlikely to stabilize for some years, it is without doubt that Turkish policymakers will continue with their efforts to create new networks of interdependency

between Ankara and the regional capitals. It is also without doubt that other regional players, especially Russia and Iran, will continue to view these policies with suspicion and challenge them.

Even if Turkey's initial stance towards Eurasia proved somewhat unrealistic, the effects it generated did set the tone for Turkish policy for the rest of the 1990s and early 2000s. While Turkey has not necessarily become the model to which the new states of Eurasia aspire, its thriving private sector, its secular, pluralist approach toward Islam, and its usually functioning democracy continue to have their appeal in the region. Meanwhile, Turkey has learned two important lessons *vis-à-vis* its relationship with Russia: that Russia is an important economic partner for Turkey, and that an overly aggressive foreign policy in Eurasia is not advisable, given the risk of escalation into direct confrontation with Russia, the regional superpower.

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