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Strengths and Constraints of Turkish Policy in the South Caucasus

BAYRAM BALCI*

ABSTRACT *Just after the end of the Soviet Union and the emergence of three independent states in the South Caucasus Turkey started to manifest a real interest for this region. Energy issue, which is the key issue in this Turkish policy since the beginning, is expected to remain the key priority for Turkey because of its growing economy. Ankara tries to have a balanced relations with the three South Caucasian countries, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, but for multiple reasons, Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus is still determined by its relations with Azerbaijan who is the best ally and economic partner for Ankara.*

Turkey, despite being an immediate neighbor of the South Caucasus or Caucasian countries and having a shared history because of the Ottoman domination of this region, has only recently expressed an interest and developed a foreign policy towards the three South Caucasus republics. Since their accession to independence in 1991, Ankara has established unique ties with these nations. However, Turkey is not the only regional power to be looking into its neighborhood. Two other neighbors, which have also historically dominated this region, are manifesting a likewise legitimate interest: Russia and Iran. In fact, with the end of the Soviet Union, the new

geographical configuration in the area fed the expectation that a new struggle for influence in this region would soon be revived amongst the old empires: the Russians, the Safavids, and the Ottomans and their heirs, Russia, Iran, and Turkey. But this confrontation has not taken place. To date, political pragmatism and economic cooperation have prevailed. In particular, Turkey and Russia have succeeded in avoiding all direct conflict in the affairs of the Southern Caucasus. Still, they can be considered the sources of polarization in conflicts, such as the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh or the secessionist movement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia.

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A General Perspective of Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Southern Caucasus

The end of the bipolar world was a watershed moment in the history of Turkey's foreign policy. No longer having to serve the role of the buffer zone between East and West, Turkey aspires to become a major political actor and to impose itself on the regional scene in the post-Soviet era. The Turkic republics of the area are of particular importance to Turkey. In the heart of the Caucasus stands Azerbaijan, culturally and politically the closest to Turkey. Fearful that this new region would fall under the influence of countries hostile to the West, like Iran or Saudi Arabia, or to avoid a return of Russia, Turkey's western allies strongly encouraged Ankara to present itself as a model of secular development. However, for a multitude of reasons, including a lack of sufficient resources, the reticence of these newly formed republics to relinquish their sovereignty in exchange for an outside model, and their apprehension of Russia's return to its "old neighborhood," Ankara has revisited its far sighted ambitions and returned to a more realistic approach.¹

When the AK Party acceded to power in 2002, it put into place a more assertive foreign policy largely due to the economic miracle of the "Anatolian Tigers." At the same time, Turkey was cautious not to be overly ambitious in the Caucasus to avoid stirring up trouble and rubbing Russia

the wrong way. As it turned out, the results were mixed, and even disappointing politically, however there was success in the economic and cultural spheres. Turkey's priority was in the area of energy and its participation in the realization of the "project of the century," the construction of the Baku, Tbilisi, Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Following long and intense negotiations and political maneuvering, in 2005, the BTC turned Turkey into a key country for the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea to European markets². The BTC was extended by the Baku, Tbilisi, and Erzurum pipeline for the transport of natural gas. This very pipeline is in the process of being further extended by the construction of two new pipelines that are underway: TAP and TANAP, respectively the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and the Trans Anatolian Pipeline. Once completed, they will allow for an improved transit of gas from the Caspian Sea to the Markets of Europe – passing through Georgia, Turkey, Albania, Greece, and Italy. By reducing European dependence on Russian natural gas, these pipelines will turn Turkey into an energy hub and a major actor for exchanges between Europe and the Caspian basin³.

Politically and geo-strategically, Turkey is still not the major actor its foreign policy architects dreamt of being at the end of the Soviet era. Two events illustrate this current failure in Turkey's foreign policy ambitions and have forced it to be more modest. First, as a close ally to Azerbaijan, Turkey did little to help resolve the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh. The

Minsk group, which did not include Turkey and had the mission to promote the advancement of the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, produced little in accomplishing any significant improvement in a conflict that has been frozen for over twenty years. Second, the short war in the summer of 2008 between Russian and Georgia also revealed Turkey's political effacement in the Southern Caucasus. Having normally good relations with both Russia and Georgia, Turkey attempted to play a mediation role in the conflict but rapidly became aware that it was ineffective. Confronted by Russia's growing ambitions, Turkey has little leverage, especially in the Southern Caucasus. Thus, Ankara launched the "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform," which brought together the three Caucasus Republics, Turkey, and Russia. Unfortunately, these efforts only revealed Turkey's position of inferiority in relation to Russia in this region.⁴ Most recently, in March 2014, Ankara has felt its impotency in the region following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Turkey's diplomats were forced to curtail their criticism of this act to avoid all direct confrontation with a major economic partner: Russia.⁵

However, when it comes to "soft power," Turkey has considerable influence in the Southern Caucasus. Turkey's television broadcasts of shows and programs are exceptionally popular in Azerbaijan. Reciprocal tourism is flourishing between Turkey and the Caucasus. Turkish religious influence is notable, not only in Azerbaijan but

Turkey and Russia have succeeded in avoiding all direct conflict in the affairs of the Southern Caucasus

also in the Muslim regions of Georgia (in the region of Adjara and the border areas of Azerbaijan). Indirectly linked to this soft power are the cultural and educational activities of the Gulenist movement, which reaches both Azerbaijan and Georgia where five schools and one university have been established. However, since an open political rift has erupted in Turkey between Prime Minister Erdogan and Fethullah Gülen (the spiritual leader of the Gulenist movement), serious repercussions could emerge in the region, especially in Azerbaijan where the Gülen movement affiliated activities have already been severely scrutinized by local authorities. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that a generation of political elites has been formed because of these educational establishments created by the Gulenist movement. Still, despite the State University of Yerevan opening of a Department of Turkish Studies with more than 200 students studying Turkish language and civilization, soft power in Armenia remains weak.

There are evident disparities in the bilateral relations between Turkey and each of these Republics of the Southern Caucasus. Each of these three countries has striking differences. More importantly, they each

represent diverse interests for Turkey. Thus, they each have taken on a unique place in Ankara's foreign policy.

Turkey-Azerbaijan, a Quasi-perfect Convergence of Viewpoints and Interests in the Southern Caucasus

Azerbaijan holds a unique place in Turkey's foreign policy, not only in the Caucasus and in the general Turkic speaking region but also beyond. This closeness is not only due to the shared cultural and linguistic affinities but also to the strong political and strategic interests that exist between these two countries. Their bilateral relations are often characterized as "two states, one nation." With the end of the Soviet Empire, Turkey sought to recreate a solidarity based on "Turkishness," connecting all Turkish-speaking nations. Azerbaijan was the most enthusiastic in heeding this call. Good bilateral relations are not limited to official government interactions, as the two societies are very close and intertwined culturally. Many Turks are of Azerbaijani origin, and since the end of the Soviet era, there is an increasing number of marriages between Turks and Azeris. Ethnically, these two people are almost identical. This is true to the extent that religious differences are erased, as Turkey is a Sunni majority country and Azerbaijan is 65% Shiite. All these factors explain the generally good relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan; however, they do not mask certain emerging tensions.

At the beginning of Azerbaijan's independence, relations were warm between the two countries. The first President of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey, was known for his Pan-Turkism and his strong attachment to Turkey. However, in 1993, he was overthrown by a coup d'état and was replaced by Heydar Aliyev, who put in place a more pragmatic foreign policy that was less tied to Turkey. Still, he maintained good relations with Ankara. Since 2003, his son Ilham has followed a similar political line and has been able to manage Azerbaijan's neighbors. Concretely, Turkey has actively supported Azerbaijan's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as other regional security issues; for example, when tensions emerged between Azerbaijan and Iran.⁶ In exchange, Azerbaijan supports Turkey's initiatives, like the Turcophone Summits, even if these summits are not met with much enthusiasm in Central Asia. In sum, Turkey and Azerbaijan share similar positions on the Armenian question of genocide, conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh, and regional security issues.

In terms of economics, the two countries are linked through a multiplicity of accords, which permit exchanges in all sectors, however the energy section is by far the most dynamic. A number of Turkish companies are investing in Azerbaijan, but the BTC, the BTE and the other pipelines that are under construction, like the TAP and the TANAP, represent the keys to relations between these two countries, and even their future. Moreover, petrol revenues have permitted Azerbai-



jan to massively invest in the Turkish economy.⁷

In the area of ideas, relations are even more developed and have history. The Turkish Republic was ideologically founded by the intellectuals who were in some cases originated from Azerbaijan. The Soviet “parenthetical” was not an obstacle to renewing the cultural and religious relations between the two countries when the Soviet Union collapsed. Turkish television networks are avidly followed in Azerbaijan, and the similarity of the language is apparent in the streets of Baku. In the religious domain, Azerbaijani Shiism and Turkish Sunnism do not hinder cooperation be-

tween the two countries. The Turkish Religious Affairs Administration, “Diyanet,” cooperates with the Spiritual Leader of Baku, and a number of Turkish Islamic movements are implanted in Azerbaijan, like the disciples of Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan, or those of the mystic Nakshibendi Osman Nuri Topbas. Finally, in the area of education, there is the strong presence of the educational institutions set up by Fethullah Gulen. A number of his followers have set up universities as well as dozens of schools and exam preparatory schools.⁸

Thus, relations between the two countries are excellent at all levels. They are grounded but it does not mean that

Prime Minister
Recep Tayyip
Erdoğan and
İlham Aliyev, the
Prime Minister
of Azerbaijan in
Baku, Azerbaijan.
AA / Vugar Ibadov

certain tensions do not exist. In particular, when Ankara moves towards normalizing its relations with Armenia, it meets with strong resistance from its Azerbaijani ally. The next section will demonstrate how Turkey's foreign policy towards Armenia is decided, really, in Baku rather than in Ankara.

Turkey-Armenia, an Impossible Reconciliation?

Relations between Turkey and Armenia remain, to say the least, very delicate and complex, as history and the frozen conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh weigh heavily on the present. Turkey did recognize Armenia's independence at the end of the Soviet era and considered establishing diplomatic relations with Yerevan. However, these relations were short lived. In 1993, in solidarity with Azerbaijan, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia to protest against the occupation of Karabakh and certain other Azerbaijani towns by the Armenian forces. Ever since, this cold conflict has been an insurmountable obstacle in the normalization of relations between the two countries and has had an impact on Turkey's foreign policy in the Caucasus.

The other thorny issue is the question of the Armenian genocide. Armenia qualifies the massacre of the Armenian populations in 1915 under the Ottoman Empire as genocide and actively advocates in the international community to have it recognized as such.⁹ Turkey does not deny the mas-

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sacres, but it contests the extent of the tragedy, which it argues took place in the context of the Russian-Turkish wars and these tragic events had an impact on all parties involved.

Also, but none the less not a marginal issue, the exact demarcation of the border between the two countries is a subject of controversy. Turkey fully recognizes its actual borders, but Ankara still considers that Yerevan is ambiguous on this issue and has invited it to clarify its position on the official border.¹⁰

Having been stuck in an impasse throughout the 1990s, relations with Armenia have improved since the AK Party came to power and introduced its foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors." Turkey has tried to improve its relations with all of its neighbors. The first steps were made in 2008, within the framework of "football diplomacy." Taking advantage of soccer matches between Turkey and Armenia in 2008 to qualify for the Euro Cup, President Abdullah Gul and his counterpart, Serzh

Sargsyan, held mutual visits. These visits, undoubtedly, opened the door for dialogue and other bolder initiatives. Secret negotiations led to the preparation of the “Negotiation of the Protocols” to normalize relations between Turkey and Armenia.”¹¹ However, these efforts, no matter how sincere they may have been, fell to the weigh side under the reaction and pressure coming from Azerbaijan, who accused Turkey of treason and trying to marginalize Baku from the negotiations, especially excluding the Nagorno-Karabakh from the equation. In retaliation, Azerbaijan threatened to increase the price of oil and other derivative products exported to Turkey. Azerbaijan even threatened to use Russia as a transport route for oil and gas instead of Turkey.¹² Thus, Azerbaijan’s leverage over Turkey compromised the successful resolution of these Protocols and the revelations to the public of these secret talks forced the two parties to retract themselves from previous positions, holding a much less conciliatory stance. In fact, the Protocols failed to obtain the approval of the two parliaments without which any normalization is impossible.

However, this failure to achieve normalization cannot be viewed as a total failure. The process allowed Turkish and Armenian negotiators to meet. It also encouraged civil society on both sides of the border to start a serious discussion and to reflect upon these painful topics. Initiated before these political discussions took place – the dialogue between historians, intellectuals, and academics now is a new

development and opens the door to many other initiatives. True, next year’s commemoration in 2015 of the hundred year old tragedy of 1915 risks polarizing the two camps but the first efforts of negotiations gives us hope that dialogue is possible. Indeed, in April 2014, the Turkish Prime Minister’s official expression of condolences for the descendants of the Armenian died in 1915 under Ottomans was a step forward in the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia.¹³

Turkey and Georgia, the Bridge Between the Caspian and Europe

Turks and Georgians have a long common history marked by conflicts of bordering countries. The Ottoman Empire dominated for a longtime part of the current Georgian territory, notably the province of Ajaria, which was islamicized as of the 16th century. Despite this tumultuous past, the advent of an independent Georgia from the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed a development of good relations between Ankara and Tbilisi, which Turkey privileged for two reasons. First, for Turkey, the Georgian territory is an entrance corridor to the Caucasus and Central Asia or Turkic World, beyond the Caspian Sea.¹⁴ Second, Georgia possesses fundamental importance for Turkey since the hydrocarbons of the Caspian Sea pass through the country to reach the Turkish ports and the international markets.

Reciprocally, Turkey is a key country for Georgia for at least two reasons

as well. First, it is a window toward Europe for Georgia. Turkey's negotiations for EU membership are of great importance for Tbilisi, as it aspires to go beyond its own Caucasus enclave. Second, in the context of its conflictual relations with the other

The diplomatic initiative to create the “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” by only grouping regional actors to manage regional problems, quickly showed the limitations of Turkey’s power

regional superpower, Russia, Georgia needs Turkey as a balancing power, in particular, to overcome its economic problems and counter the Russian markets, which have been closed to it since the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008.

Thus, since their establishment in the early 90s, relations between Georgia and Turkey have been warm and carefully maintained through regular mutual visits. The change of power that occurred with the Revolution of the Roses in 2003, and the failure at the ballot box for Saakashvili in October 2012 with the arrival to power of his rival Bidzina Ivanishvili only had a limited amount of repercussions on the good relations with Turkey. Still, these relations are sometimes difficult to manage for Turkey since the AKP came to power and established

a rapprochement policy with Russia. Georgia's pro-Western stance and its desire to enter NATO have rendered Turkey's dual attempt to have good relations with both Russia and Georgia difficult to navigate. Thus, in August 2008, when Russia invaded a part of Georgia, which was seeking to recuperate its secessionist province of South Ossetia, Turkey found itself in a very awkward position. The diplomatic initiative to create the “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” by only grouping regional actors to manage regional problems, quickly showed the limitations of Turkey's power in its immediate surroundings.¹⁵

The generally good relations between Turkey and Georgia encounter on occasion minor tensions. The activism of the Abkhazia minority of Turkey regularly stirs up trouble, as they maintain commercial activities with Abkhazia. But this region of Georgia is secessionist. As Tbilisi tries to quell the insurgency, it looks at the exchanges with Turkey with a critical eye, recognizing that they are out of its control.

Meanwhile, there also exist some religious tensions between the two countries. Georgians, in particular the Georgian Church, which has seen an increasing political role over recent years, does not appreciate the religious activism of certain Turkish groups on its territory, in particular in Ajaria. More prosaically, the building of new mosques or the restoration of older ones abandoned during the Soviet era, which are financed by the

private initiatives of certain groups, like Suleyman Tunahan's group, are badly perceived by certain segments of the population, who feel that their Christian identity is being threatened. Similarly, Turkey is seeking to rebuild the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi, a vestige of the Ottoman past and domination of the region.¹⁶ To counterbalance and resolve these tensions, Turkey has offered to restore old Georgian Churches in Turkey. These cooperation efforts are continuing but their final outcome remains uncertain. Their success depends on the strengthening of bilateral relations.

Finally, the question of Meshkete is divisive. The Meshketians, also known as the Ahiska, are a small Turkish minority from Georgia – deported in 1944 from their villages in the steps of Central Asia. After the end of the Soviet era, similarly to a large number of peoples of the Caucasus, many who were deported are seeking to return to their homes. Supported by Turkey in their quest to return home, these numerous Meshketians have not obtained Tbilisi's agreement to return to their lands, despite multiple promises.

Overall, relations between Turkey and Georgia are very good. The development of the pipeline projects, in particular the TAP and the TANAP will render the Turkish and Georgian economies even more complementary and interdependent. Similarly, the annexation of the Crimea by the Russians will most likely slow the progress of a renewal of Russian-Georgian

relations, which Prime Minister Ivanishvili had begun and will instead reinforce relations between Ankara and Tbilisi.

Conclusion

At the end of the Soviet era, the Caucasus and Central Asia have taken an important place in Turkey's foreign policy. However, Ankara's ambitions have been beyond its actual capacity for action. So, it has returned to a more pragmatic and realist posture. Consequently, Turkey's foreign policy in this region has somewhat neglected Central Asia but maintained a keen interest in the Caucasus, in particular, because of its importance in the energy sector. Furthermore, the diplomatic initiative of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has it as a central goal to better Turkey's relations with its neighbors, and notably Armenia. The normalization of its relations with these countries remains one of Turkey's priorities, not only for economic reasons but also for political and symbolic ones – as Turkey wants to appear as a country at peace with its neighbors. This situation has become ever more pressing in the Caucasus, as Turkey is trying not to become more embroiled in the Syrian civil war and also is seeing its relations with countries of the Middle East deteriorate.

For Ankara, however, for its relations to improve with Armenia, the conflict of the Nagorno-Karabakh must be resolved. Thus, Turkey's best bet for partnership in the region is

Azerbaijan. The conundrum is that Azerbaijan's strategy is to isolate Armenia. It won't hesitate to block Turkey's efforts towards Armenia and will use its energy ticket as a form of blackmail, taking Turkey as a "hostage" in the process. Nevertheless, maintaining the status quo on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict serves as a political lever for Baku in defense of its domestic and foreign interests. This situation, which looks like it may last, makes Baku the center of attention and decision making on a number of unavoidable issues in the region, including how Turkey can carry out its foreign policy in the South Caucasus. ■

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