

Turkey Returns to a Transformed Transcaucasus

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Moscow's use of force in Georgia and Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia created the sense in many capitals that the situation in the South Caucasus and even further afield had been fundamentally transformed. At the very least, because the rules of the game that had governed international relations there had been called into question and because the relative power of the players had been shifted, many governments decided to explore the limits of the new game by announcing new initiatives or changing their relationships to both those with whom they had been close in the past and those with whom they had a less satisfactory relationship.

No government has sought to exploit this situation more fully than Turkey which in the last two months has signaled its desire to emerge as a regional power more independent from the West than ever before by announcing its own plan for regional security that calls into question other political and economic arrangements in the region, seeking closer cooperation with the Russian Federation, and perhaps most unexpectedly of all pursuing a rapprochement with Armenia, a neighboring country with which for a variety of reasons, it does not have diplomatic relations.

These steps by Ankara have created genuine excitement not only in Turkey but in the broader region, but it remains to be seen just what an impact they will ultimately have. On the one hand, many of the other actors in the region are not interested in seeing Ankara succeed because its success would represent a defeat for them. And on the other, despite the enormous impact of Russia's actions in Georgia on the region, these moves did not in fact change everything; and the power of geography, history and culture in the South Caucasus as everywhere else may undermine the expectations some have that the region has entered a new era.

It is far too early to draw any final conclusion about Turkey's latest efforts in the South Caucasus, but it is possible to describe some of the elements of the changed calculus in Ankara concerning the region, to discuss the reasons behind its proposal of a new regional security platform and its warming relations with Russia and Armenia, and to identify some of the features of Turkey itself and the region as a whole that have not changed and thus will continue to play a role.

Turkey's New Outlook on the World [1]

The events in Georgia had an especially great impact on Ankara for two reasons. On the one hand, after a long period of focusing more on its domestic difficulties than on foreign policy possibilities, Turkey saw those events as providing it with an opportunity to re-enter the broader geopolitical world. And on the other, because of its disappointment with both the European Union and NATO and because of its role as a major transport route for Caspian basin and West Siberian hydrocarbons regardless of whether they come through or bypass Russia, Turkey was prepared to exploit the dramatically different situation Russia's invasion of Georgia appeared to have created.

For much of the last decade, Turkey has been struggling with the nature of its identity, with political parties and the military fighting over whether it will remain a secular nationalist Turkic state linked in the West to Europe and the United States via NATO and in the East to Azerbaijan, Central Asia and Israel or whether it will become more Islamic and thus more closely involved with the Muslim world of the Arabian peninsula and the Maghreb. Historical tradition, military calculations, and economics drove it in the former direction, but demography and the decline in the influence of outside powers drove it in the latter.

The tilt in the latter direction was exacerbated by Turkey's increasing unhappiness with Europe and the United States. It has become increasingly clear that the European Union does not want to take Turkey in as a member, something that has undercut the secularists in Ankara and led many Turks to think about the other worlds of which they are a part. Among those is the Caucasus as a geographical region and not just its secular Turkic direction as represented by Azerbaijan.

At the same time, Turkey has become increasingly displeased with the United States and NATO. In the early 1990s, Turkey at Washington's behest sought to promote secular democratic values in the Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union, but it found that it lost influence rather than gained it because it was viewed by many people in these countries as little more than a tool of Washington. Moreover, Ankara was increasingly sensitive to the reality that the United States, despite its constant claims of being the last remaining superpower, was becoming far weaker and less reliable as an ally of Turkey.

And because of the way in which the United States has acted in Iraq, virtually creating after 1991 an independent Kurdish region that served as a beacon for the Kurdish minority of Turkey itself and involving Turkey as a NATO member in ways that have undermined its ability to function in the region, except in concert with the United States and Israel, Turkey is increasingly interested in demonstrating its ability to be an independent actor, linked to Europe and the United States in some respects but capable of defining its place in the world on its own rather than allowing either of those power centers to do so.

Russia's moves in Georgia, an indication that Moscow, too, has concluded that it can act against both Europe and the United States and get away with it, gave Ankara an opportunity to act on many of the ideas its leaders had been thinking about for some years and to advance a claim, by taking actions with regard to the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia that most people had assumed up to then were unthinkable, even impossible, that it is now more than at any time in the last century the master of its own fate.

Three Remarkable Initiatives

Over the last two months, Turkey has pursued three remarkable policies in the Caucasus, all of which share three common characteristics. First, they have been under discussion in Ankara for years and have important roots in domestic changes that have taken place in Turkey over the last 15 years. Second, these policies involve steps that most other countries in the region or with interests there had assumed were impossible. And third, they not only fly in the face of certain geographic, cultural and political realities but are already facing difficulties, not only because other governments are moving to counter them but also because Turkey lacks either the resources or the political consensus to implement on its own.

A Regional Security Initiative

Less than 10 days after the Russians moved into Georgia, Turkey presented its plan for the creation of a Platform for Stability and Cooperation in the Caucasus, a grouping that would in the minds of Ankara bring together a new set of countries into a single organization and thus offer new possibilities for stability, the sine qua non of Turkey's interest in the region given its desire to increase its influence and to profit from the flow of hydrocarbons outward.

Many analysts around the world were shocked by this independent action, but they should not have been. Turkish leaders from the early 1990s had been discussing it in public, and it assumed its final shape shortly after the Europeans adopted a similar Pact of Stability for South Eastern Europe, an EU measure designed to promote regional cooperation, on the one hand, and the influence of the EU in that region on the other. But until Russia changed the game by its move in Georgia, Turkey had no chance to push this idea very far forward.

Too many countries were either skeptical or opposed, including not unimportantly Russia, Azerbaijan

and the United States, each of which had its own reasons for thinking that such an entity would either get in the way of its own specific agenda or allow one of its geopolitical opponents to gain the upper hand. None of them viewed it as a measure that could allow Turkey to become a leading power in the region, even though that is clearly what Ankara hoped for. After some initial enthusiasm from Russia, Ankara has had to face the fact that few of the other players in the region are all that pleased with the idea. And consequently, it appears likely to become, like many other institutions in the Caucasus, a subject of long if not especially intense conversation but little if any real action.

Rapprochement with the Russian Federation [2]

Turkey's rapprochement with the Russian Federation has been taking place since the early 1990s. Money coming in from massive Russian tourism, the Blue Stream gas project, and other Russian investments, on the one hand, and Russia's withdrawal of support for the Kurds and the absence of Russian criticism of Turkey's domestic behavior, on the other, have transformed Russia in the minds of most Turkish policy-makers from an enemy to a partner far more than many in the Caucasus, the West or even in Moscow appear to have recognized. All of these things came together in August and September of this year during and immediately after the Georgian conflict when Moscow showed particular solicitude to Turkey, with repeated visits in both directions by senior officials highlighting that Ankara and Moscow were now going to publicly proclaim what had earlier been only a diplomatic nicety that they were partners, with both far more interested in stability and business rather than change and democracy. But there are clear limits to this rapprochement.

On the one hand, many Turks remain deeply suspicious of Russian intentions and interested in expanding Ankara's influence in the Turkic portion of what Moscow continues to call its "near abroad." And on the other, however much Moscow and Ankara may agree on the principle of the inviolability of borders, they are at odds both because of Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and because of Moscow's support for Yerevan and Armenia's occupation of Karabakh and adjoining territories in Azerbaijan.

If Moscow were to change its position on that conflict, a true Turkish-Russian rapprochement might be possible; but until it does, there are severe limits on the relationship, however much warmer it is now than in the past.

Toward a New Relationship with Armenia

Until September 6, when Turkish President Abdulla Gul went to Yerevan to attend a football match, hostility toward Armenia appeared to be a central tenet of Turkish thinking.

First of all, Armenians insist that Turkey recognize that the 1915 events in Turkey were genocide, something Turkey strongly rejects. (2) Second, Turkey not only broke relations but has maintained a formal economic blockade of Armenia because of the Karabakh conflict. (3) And third, the political elites of both countries have found it useful to point to the existence of the other to justify mobilization and to distract attention from problems at home.

Despite those factors, there had in fact been movement in this relationship long before the Georgian events. First, it has become increasingly clear that Yerevan is less obsessed with the 1915 question than is the Armenian diaspora for whom it is an existential issue, and an increasing number of Turks have been moving toward the kind of language the Armenian government if not the diaspora could accept.

Second, while there is a formal blockade, Armenia and Turkey do a great deal of business across their common border. They would do more if the border were regularized and open, and thus there are groups in both countries pushing for that. And third, the elites in both now have other "others" they can point to for their domestic political needs.

Consequently, while it was certainly dramatic, Gul's visit to Yerevan and the progress that points to in

overcoming this rift should not have been as surprising as they were to so many. But at the same time, it is clear that this relationship is not going to be normal or warm anytime soon. Gul did invite his Armenian counterpart to come to Turkey for a return football match—but only to one that will take place in November 2009. And significant progress on Karabakh seems unlikely, especially since Yerevan's main foreign supporter—Moscow—does not so much want a resolution as a continuation of the current status quo.

The Limits of Change [3]

Thus, in all three cases, the amount of progress that the Georgian events contributed to in Turkey's re-orientation has been relatively small. That too should not have surprised anyone. The geography of the region has not changed, Turkey's concerns about Turkishness and territorial integrity remain in place, and other players like the Europeans and the Americans, however much their power may have declined in the eyes of Turkey and others, still matter a great deal.

Moreover, as so often happens when a country attempts to make a breakthrough to the next level of a geopolitical game, Turkey finds itself in a position where it lacks the resources to pursue its own goals to the end by itself and thus may be exploited by those it hopes to cooperate with in ways it does not want. Thus, for example, Moscow welcomes the idea of a Russian-Turkish reaffirmation of the Kars Treaty of 1920 but for very different reasons than Ankara does. Ankara wants that as a measure of its success as a player; Moscow wants it to put pressure on Tbilisi to restore Ajarian autonomy and thus give the Russian government another lever on the Georgian government.

Consequently, it is very likely that six months or so from now, the various governments in the South Caucasus will look back on this remarkable period in much the same way many observers did on the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. At the time that event happened, almost everyone assumed that the world had entered an entirely new era, but soon it became clear that the new era was not as different from the old one as they had thought.

That pattern was captured in a metaphor that applies to the current case as well. It was said in the early 1990s, that 1991 in Eurasia resembled a huge tree in which an enormous flock of birds was resting. When a gun went off, all the birds rose from the tree in fright, leaving it a very different place. But as the sound of the gun dissipated, the birds began to settle back down, most if not all of them on the same branches they had been sitting on only a short time ago.

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Notes

[1] This section draws on Mamayev (2008) and Davletov (2008).

[2] On these points, see, among others, Serenko (2008a) and Serenko (2008b).

[3] For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Çelikpala (2008).