The South Caucasus
Between integration and fragmentation

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Turkey's role in the South Caucasus: between fragmentation and integration

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Introduction

Because of its geostrategic location and natural resources, the South Caucasus has been a focus of geopolitical competition among regional and extra-regional powers for centuries. The strategic importance of the region has further increased due to east-west transportation and energy projects in the 21st century. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created a power gap in the region, which led to two parallel processes: regional states seeking new internal and external identities, and geopolitical competition among the large regional powers (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) along with the US and to a lesser extent the EU.

Today Turkey is a member of NATO and a candidate country for EU membership, while also having good relations with Russia. During the 1990s this was not the case, as Turkey's foreign policy was aligned with that of the US. Turkey's regional policy was aimed at establishing regional organisations such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) that were compatible with, and ready to cooperate with, the West. When today's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, a profound change occurred in Turkey's foreign policy that had an impact on the country's approach towards the South Caucasus. Over the past ten years this policy has become increasingly balanced in terms of Ankara's relations with the West and Russia. This change came about as a consequence of a number of regional events which will be elaborated in this paper including the impact of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, efforts to bring about Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral dialogue and the Ukraine crisis.

From model state to "central" country

As a NATO member Turkey played a key role during the Cold War in shoring up Euro-Atlantic security. During this period Ankara's Western allies promoted Turkey as a role model country with the expectation that Turkey's influence would limit the influence of Russia and Iran in this region.¹ With the end of the Cold War, Turkey lost this mission and its strategic importance as a buffer zone against possible Soviet expansion.² Since then Turkey, with its democratic and secular identity and free-market economy, has been promoted as a model for the emerging independent nations of the region.³

During the 1990s, Turkey supported the integration process of the South Caucasus with the West in two ways: via their integration into NATO and the EU; and through regional projects, including those related to transport, such as the 'East-West Corridor'.⁴ However, economic crises and political unrest during the 1990s prevented Turkey from having an effective regional role. Consequently the role of the 'model' or 'bridge' country that was ascribed to Turkey by the West was inconclusive.⁵
The events of 9/11 increased tension between the East and the West within the Eurasian region and the 2001 economic crisis signalled a new regional order. Along with many other countries, Turkey has repositioned itself by prioritising concepts such as interdependence, economic cooperation, regional integration and a proactive foreign policy, as well as peace and stability.

In these new circumstances the foreign policy principles that are pursued by Turkey have five main pillars: a foreign policy agenda does not focus solely on security issues, but also economic and humanitarian issues; a "zero problem policy towards Turkey's neighbours"; development of relations with neighbouring regions and beyond; and a multi-dimensional foreign policy and rhythmic diplomacy. According to the main architect of Turkey's Foreign Policy, former Foreign Minister and today's Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, since Turkey is, historically and geographically, a central state between East and West, South and North, one should identify the position of Turkey not as a bridge but as a "central country". As stated in his well-known book 'Strategic Depth', the "country's sphere of influence is the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf and the Black Sea country."

As a "central state" in geographical terms, Turkey adopted a multilateral approach in order to diversify its relations with all parties, including Russia and Armenia. On the one hand, Turkey seeks good relations with Russia, while on the other, as a member of NATO, Turkey attempts to coordinate relations between Azerbaijan, Georgia and the West. Despite the different nature of relationships between NATO, Georgia and Azerbaijan, Turkey has supported their integration from the beginning. Azerbaijani military officers have participated in Partnership for Peace (PfP) courses in Turkey, and Turkish officers have visited Azerbaijan for the same reason. The most concrete result of military cooperation in the framework of NATO between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia was in Kosovo when Georgian and Azerbaijani troops served under Turkish command. Thus, Turkey has sought to include other regional players in its South Caucasus policy.

**Turkey and Western interests diverging in the South Caucasus**

The 2008 Russian-Georgian war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea were the result of Russian and NATO/EU competition within the geography of the Black Sea region. Both wars placed Turkey in a difficult diplomatic position. Although Turkey is a member of NATO and a strategic ally of the US, growing economic and energy ties with Russia influenced Ankara's reaction to developments in the South Caucasus. As Turkey's relationship with Washington and the EU deteriorated as a consequence of both former US President George W. Bush's policy vis-à-vis Iraq and Ankara's stalled EU accession talks, the country's relationship with Russia deepened.

US-Turkey relations began to deteriorate following the decision of the Turkish Parliament not to allow the US military to enter Iraq from Turkey during the US military intervention there in 2003. While the US sought alternative countries as strategic replacements for Turkey, Ankara went through a process of repositioning itself in line with the new international setting. Turkey became concerned over what it perceived as a US policy of encouraging the
'colour revolutions' and regime change in Georgia in November 2003, Ukraine in December 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. Nationalists in Ankara believed that the "march of freedom and democracy" spearheaded by the US could lead to instability on its borders. Like Russia, Turkey opposed the extension of NATO's Operation Active Endeavour from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, suggesting that BLACKSEAFOR undertake the relevant tasks. According to some experts, Turkey was also not a strong supporter of NATO's eastern enlargement and was adamantly opposed to US military deployments close to its borders, which, from the Turkish perspective, would diminish the strategic importance of Turkey's geography. In addition, there were preoccupations that NATO's eastern enlargement, seen as a tool for US expansion of influence, could result in instability in pivotal regions. Consequently, US military deployments could cause tensions between the West and Russia which would have a negative impact on Turkey-Russia relations.

While Turkish and US policies concerning Turkey's "near abroad" diverged, Russia and Turkey developed their relations. In particular, groups of nationalists and hard-core Kemalist intellectuals were concerned that following the occupation of Iraq and the colour revolutions, the US now surrounded Turkey. In the opinion of opponents of US policies in the region, the only way forward for Turkey was to establish good relations with Russia, China, Japan and India. Moreover, according to Igor Torbakov, a well-known Russian academic, the emergence of a Russian-Turkish regional alliance was a natural outcome of Moscow's and Ankara's common concerns about the US' "destabilising policies" in the South Caucasus.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan enjoy increasingly close ties and have met many times. The first official high-level visit to Turkey in almost 30 years was made by Putin in 2004. In 2002 trade volume between Russia and Turkey was $6 billion. By 2014 it had reached $33 billion. During Putin's most recent visit to Turkey on 1 December 2014, Russia and Turkey pledged to increase bilateral trade to $100 billion by 2020. Turkey's economic interests give Ankara a strong incentive to maintain stable political relations with Russia. Moreover, parts of the Turkish business community have developed a strong economic stake in trade with Russia and constitute an important domestic lobby in support of this trade. They were particularly influential in pushing for the construction of the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline. Indeed, the growing Turkish-Russian economic rapprochement is particularly evident in the energy sphere. Russia supplies over 60% of Turkey's natural gas and close to half of Turkey's crude oil. The growing economic interdependence is beginning to temper traditional Russian attitudes toward Turkey. Increasingly, Turkey is seen more as an important economic partner, rather than a geopolitical rival. This view was strengthened in the aftermath of Putin's surprise announcement in December 2014 that he would abandon the South Stream pipeline in favour of an alternative route through Turkey – Turkish Stream.

It should also be worth underlining that although Turkey publicly supported Georgia's territorial integrity during the Russia-Georgia War, Ankara refrained from embracing the stronger rhetoric coming out of Washington and Brussels. At the time Erdogan stated: "America is our ally and the Russian Federation is an important neighbour". After the war Turkey proposed the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact (CSCP) platform, which
included Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{25} The CSCP included neither the US nor EU member states nor guarantees regarding their interests, but included Russia.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, the Caucasus initiative proposed by Turkey seemed to be aimed at reducing Western strategic involvement in Caucasus affairs and helping to make the region more "self-sustainable" and "dependent on local players".\textsuperscript{27}

Moreover the Russia-Georgia war significantly changed the overall geopolitical balance in the entire South Caucasus and Caspian region. The West (and specifically the US) demonstrated both an unwillingness and inability to firmly support Georgia. As a result, in the eyes of Russia's neighbours, the West all but lost credibility as a security counterbalance to Russia.\textsuperscript{28} This was further emphasised by Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine.

Events in Ukraine have had an impact on Turkey's South Caucasus policy. The Ukraine crisis was immediately preceded by a clash between the EU and Russia over Ukraine's geostrategic choice. During the crisis, Azerbaijan and Turkey supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, while maintaining their economic relations with Russia at the same time. However, despite its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, Turkey avoided adopting a highly critical position against Russia and refused to join the EU and US in placing sanctions.\textsuperscript{29} On the contrary, Turkey used the situation as an opportunity to deepen relations with Russia.\textsuperscript{30} Turkey's Minister of Economy, Nihat Zeybekçi, underlined that Russia's trade restrictions served as a window of opportunity for Ankara to bolster its exports of both food and consumer goods to Russia.\textsuperscript{31} Putin visited Ankara and the two sides signed four agreements on trade and economy.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Turkey-EU-US versus Russia in the South Caucasus}

The Russia-Georgia War had two main outcomes for Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus: intensification of the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan triangle and rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia. In both cases, the regional policies of Turkey, the EU and US overlapped.

The Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia triangle represents the emergence of the geopolitical realities of the 1990s, revised after the Russia-Georgia war. The war, the reconfiguration of US policy towards Russia, the inefficacy of the EU in the region and proactive Turkish diplomacy resulted in the reactivation of this triangle. The first trilateral meeting among the foreign ministers of the three states was held in Trabzon in 2012 and resulted in a Declaration on four issues of common interest: security, energy, transportation, and trade and economy. The Trabzon Declaration stresses the importance of continued cooperation within NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme and other areas of cooperation with NATO.\textsuperscript{33} On 19 August 2014, during a meeting in Nakhchivan, defence ministers of the three countries agreed to increase cooperation in the military sphere.\textsuperscript{34} In May 2014 the three presidents met in Tbilisi. The then President of Turkey, Abdullah Gül, underlined that the main task of the triangle is to integrate with the West politically and economically.\textsuperscript{35}

The emergence of this triangle has two main perspectives: security and energy/transportation. From the security point of view, all the declarations signed contain three main aspects: emphasising the sovereignty and independence of states; rejection of separatism and threats
against their territorial integrity; and cooperation against non-traditional security threats. In 2014 Azerbaijan and Georgia wanted to emphasise their sovereignty and independence as both states viewed Moscow's diplomatic manoeuvres related to the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union as a hegemonic reconstruction of Russia, which they perceived as a threat to their sovereignty and independence. Hence both states refused to become members. In the Ganja Declaration they reiterate "their firm support for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity and underline the importance of a quick and peaceful settlement of the conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh, and the conflict over Abkhazia, and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, on the basis of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of the internationally recognised borders of the states, as well as relevant resolutions and decisions of the UNSC, UNGA, OSCE and COE." However, this triangle is not a military alliance in the traditional sense. The Security Agreement signed on 30 April 2002 was targeted at non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism, organised crime and other crimes, rather than traditional threats.

This triangle is pivotal for west-east energy and transportation routes. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) link these states like a security belt in the political and economic sense, and each state is part of the EU INOGATE programme that aims to bring Caspian and Central Asian energy resources to the West. As stated by energy expert Alexandros Peterson, "Azerbaijan possesses significant reserves of highly valued natural resources; Georgia serves as a geographically crucial transport corridor; and Turkey has deep and sustained access to world markets and international partners". To enhance their importance for the West and global energy markets, this triangle now attempts to extend their energy links towards Central Asia. The positions adopted in the Declarations include support for the transportation of the energy resources of Central Asian countries to international markets.

As previously observed, the position of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia is pivotal to the east-west corridor as well as the north-south transport axis. Each state is a member of the east-west TRACECA transport corridor including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway, which will initially carry one million people and ten million tons of cargo. The completion of the Aktau-Urumchi railway and its connection to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway will form the Iron Silk Road of the 21st Century. When the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project unites the railway networks of Central Asia, the Caucasus and China with those of Turkey and Europe, it will also facilitate the movement of cargo between the Asian and European continents. All these measures deepen integration with Western institutions, more so than regional projects such as the CIS or Eurasian Union. There are also a number of other regional triangles that have an impact on regional politics, such as Turkey-Iran-Azerbaijan and Turkey-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan.

The second outcome of the Russian-Georgian War was Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, which was supported by the US and the EU. Although Turkey recognised the independence of Armenia on 18 December 1991, the two states have no diplomatic relations due to Armenia refusing to sign a protocol declaring that Armenia has no territorial claims on Turkey in 1991. Furthermore, the Turkish-Armenian border has been closed since 1993 following Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan's Kelbejar district during the Nagorno-Karabakh war.
After 1993, all attempts at reconciliation failed. However, in 2007 secret diplomacy was used to intensify efforts, continuing in 2008 with “football diplomacy”. First, Turkey’s then President Abdullah Gül visited Armenia, which was followed by a visit of Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian to Turkey. This process continued with the declaration of a ‘Road Map’ agreement for the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia on 22 April 2009. Although there were serious objections both in Armenia and Turkey, on 10 October 2010 Davutoğlu, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Armenia, Eduard Nalbandyan, signed two separate protocols: a protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia and a protocol on the development of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

The US, and President Barack Obama in particular, strongly supported this process. The US considered the opening of the borders between Turkey and Armenia as a means to remove Armenia from Russian and Iranian influence and as an important step in its integration in the West.

During discussions between Turkey and Armenia, Azerbaijan followed the process with interest as the process directly impacted the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The fact that there was no mention of Nagorno-Karabakh in the Protocols resulted in a negative reaction from both Azerbaijan’s leadership and society in general. Consequently, during his visit to Azerbaijan on 13 May 2009, Erdogan stated that the Turkey-Armenia border could not be opened without the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijan’s occupied territories. This development was viewed by many experts as undermining the approach. Furthermore, in January 2010 the Armenian Constitutional Court found the protocols incompatible with the Armenian constitution. Thereafter they became frozen.

Since the freezing of the Protocols, Track II diplomacy between Turkey and Armenia has been ongoing, supported and funded by the US and EU. In 2010, a USAID Mission provided $2.4 million to a consortium of Armenian and Turkish organisations in Yerevan and $2.3 million for cross-border activities where Turkish and Armenian organisations partnered with US institutions. USAID also provided funding and support for an Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement Project implemented jointly by a consortium of Armenian partners, including Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Yerevan Press Club, Union of Manufacturers and Businessmen of Armenia and International Center for Human Development, and the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council. Since 2014, a consortium of eight civil society organisations from Armenia and Turkey participated in The Armenia-Turkey Normalisation Process programme funded by the EU under the Instrument for Stability. The official website of this programme states that its objective is to promote civil society efforts towards the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia and towards an open border by “enhancing people-to-people contacts, expanding economic and business links, promoting cultural and educational activities and facilitating access to balanced information in both societies”.

Currently, the Turkish government maintains its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On 12 December 2013, during his visit to Armenia, Davutoğlu stated that Turkey-Armenia normalisation should proceed in parallel with the Nagorno-Karabakh resolution process. By maintaining that there are two different processes with no links, Armenia is attempting to reduce pressure on itself and divide Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, Turkish society still
strongly opposes the opening of the border without solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Meanwhile, the Armenian diaspora has changed its position regarding the opening of the borders without preconditions. In 2009 the Armenian diaspora demanded, first, recognition of the so-called genocide by Turkey, followed by opening of the borders.

Conclusion

As a result of regional conflicts, different foreign policy strategies and the geopolitical rivalry of regional and global players, the South Caucasus has become a fragmented region from security, economic and political perspectives. However, two major obstacles continue to have a negative impact on Turkey’s South Caucasus policy: first, Russian-Georgian relations, and second, Azerbaijan-Armenia relations due to the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. These two problems have limited the effectiveness of Turkey and Turkey’s "regional integration strategy".

Today the only regional structure is the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation triangle. None of the members of this triangle are opposed to cooperation with other regional countries. As Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, stated in Tbilisi on 19 February 2015, "If Armenia changes its policy and begins to fully support Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, of course, it may join these projects."

While Turkey remains bound to the West through its traditional Euro-Atlantic partners, in particular NATO, at the same time Ankara often feels frustrated that the US frequently does not seem to consider Turkey’s interests when carving out policies in Turkey’s neighbourhood. This has resulted in Turkish-Russian relations being founded to a large degree on a sense of exclusion by the US, rather than on mutual interests. Furthermore, Russian-Western rivalry coincided with a weakening of ties between Turkey and the West, which has also played a role in strengthening ties between Moscow and Ankara. Thus, Turkey has become a state that no longer acts as the US desires in the South Caucasus. However, despite the deepened economic and political ties, Russia-Turkey competition remains.

Looking to the future, the political framework for a comprehensive nuclear deal between the P5+1 on Iran’s nuclear programme that was signed on 4 April 2015 has opened the door to a possible boost for the region in terms of investment, energy cooperation and trade. Azerbaijan declared that the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) could be used for the transportation of Iranian gas to the European market. Connecting Iran to the Southern Gas Corridor would bring substantial benefits to Turkey.

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Endnotes

2 Bülent Aras and Pınar Akpınar, The Relations between Turkey and the Caucasus, In: Perceptions, Autumn 2011, Volume XVI,


According to one of the writers on foreign policy of "Radikal" newspaper, Murat Yetkin, Armenians had different requirement for the signing of the protocols. They wanted six week consultations to be ended on 5 October. But Ankara understood the will of Armenians to use these protocols as a means of pressures on Azerbaijan at the meeting of Aliyev and Sarkisyan in the framework of the Annual summit of leaders of CIS member states and that's why wanted protocols to be signed after the meeting of Aliyev and Sarkisian. See: Murat Yetkin, Ermenistan ile Protokolun Perde Arkası, Radikal, 2 September 2009, available at: http://www.radikal.com.tr/azarlar/murat_yetkin/ermenistan_ile_protokolun_perde_arkasi-952543

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