

Russia and Turkish-Armenian Normalization: Competing Interests in the South Caucasus

IGOR TORBAKOV*

ABSTRACT

Following the 2008 Georgia war, Russia reasserted itself as the main power in the Caucasus. The war shattered the old status quo and Moscow sought to make good use of the shifting geopolitical landscape to enhance its strategic footprint in the region. Russia's policy in the Caucasus has been an example of a subtle balancing act: it appeared to have encouraged Turkish-Armenian reconciliation while at the same time skillfully exploiting the suspicions that this process aroused in Azerbaijan and seeking to put an additional pressure on Georgia. Now, as Turkish-Armenian normalization seems to have hit a snag, Moscow can safely distance itself from what increasingly looks like a failure. After all, having deftly played all its "partners" off against each other, Russia appears to have secured its objective: both Armenia and Azerbaijan tend to lean more on Russia, while Turkey's relations with the two Caucasus countries has deteriorated. Moreover, Ankara's ties with Washington became frayed, too, which, from Moscow's perspective, isn't bad either.

No one wants to be associated with failure – least of all assertive countries with leadership ambitions. So it should come as no surprise that Russia appears to be distancing itself from the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process which, many analysts say, is on the brink of collapse.

One could get a sense of Moscow's aloofness at a news conference given by Sergei Lavrov, Russia's minister of foreign affairs. When he was asked to give his perspective on the fate of the Turkish-Armenian protocols he bluntly said that it was "not his business" to comment on this matter as it is "primarily a bilateral issue concerning Armenia and Turkey." The two countries launched this process themselves without prompting by anyone, Lavrov said, adding that "the *only* thing that associates us, Russia," with the Turkish-Armenian normalization has been his personal participation – at the request of the two sides – in the Zurich cer-

* Finnish Institute of International Affairs, igor.torbakov@upi-fia.fi

emony of the signing of the protocols last October along with some other international bigwigs from the U.S., France, the EU and the Council of Europe.¹ That's it. But of course, Lavrov concluded, Russia wants to see Turkish-Armenian relations fully normalized and wishes both countries good luck.

To be sure, Mr. Lavrov is a consummate diplomat of the old Soviet school who uses his tongue, as the old quip has it, largely for the purposes of obfuscation. So the really big and pertinent question is this: what are Russia's true intentions and designs in the South Caucasus and how do the attempts to normalize Turkish-Armenian relations fit into Moscow's strategic outlook?

The South Caucasus' Changing Dynamics

Following the Soviet Union's disintegration, the South Caucasus became a troubled region plagued by multiple conflicts, rivalries, and competing policies of the outside powers. Throughout the last two decades, regional integration – arguably the only way to bring stability and prosperity to the region – has remained an unattainable goal as both regional countries and outside players have been pursuing egotistical policies and narrow objectives.²

There appears to be a consensus within the analytic community that the 2008 Russia-Georgia war marked an important watershed in the geopolitics of the Caucasus. The five-day armed conflict shattered the erstwhile precarious status quo in the region and dramatically reshaped the geopolitical landscape.³

The Caucasus war has affected all regional countries, albeit in different ways. At first glance, Russia, the “victor,” has significantly strengthened its geopolitical position in the region. By humiliating its pesky adversary, by exposing the West's seeming inability to protect its Eurasian allies, by recognizing the independence of Georgia's two break-away regions and by stationing its troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow appears to have enhanced its strategic footprint in the South Caucasus. At the same time, however, Russia's resorting to brute force and violating the territorial integrity of a post-Soviet country and a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States has significantly tarnished Moscow's image and undermined its claim to being an unbiased arbiter and efficient mediator in regional conflicts.

For its part, Georgia, the “loser,” has found itself in the aftermath of the hostilities being a hapless victim of, in the words of its leadership, “brazen foreign aggression” and “partition.” Not only was its war machine smashed and military infrastructure largely destroyed in the course of the five-day war, but – potentially even

more important – the hostilities exposed its vulnerability as a transit country, thus calling into question its prized location as the key gateway to world markets for Caspian and Central Asian hydrocarbons.

For Azerbaijan, the outcome of the Caucasus war represents a mixed bag. Perceiving itself as the victim of the Armenian aggression, Baku was clearly not satisfied with the pre-August 2008 status quo. At the same time, the recognition of independence of Georgia's secessionist provinces could not fail to increase the Azerbaijani leadership's restiveness with regard to the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh. As there is little progress in the settlement talks, Baku has started making increasingly militant noises, threatening to regain its lost territories by force.

In the wake of the war, Armenia, one of the most land-locked countries in the world, has found itself even more isolated due to the severance of ties with Russia (and the rest of the world) via the Georgian territory. With its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey blocked since the early 1990s, and being excluded from the Caucasus energy transportation equation due to the bad relations with Baku and Ankara, Armenia's geopolitical position has started looking untenable – particularly in the light of Azerbaijan's growing pugnacity.

Finally, for Turkey, the Georgia war proved to be an unpleasant surprise that caught Ankara completely off-guard. The collapse of the old status quo demanded that Turkish policymakers perform a most delicate balancing act as the 2008 conflict involved what some would call Ankara's Caucasus "client state" and the key regional power that was also Turkey's major trading partner and biggest energy supplier. As Turkish ruling elites' strategic *idée fixe* is to turn the country into a major energy hub, the exposed vulnerability of the transportation lines running through the Georgian territory prompted Ankara to start rethinking its overall Caucasus strategy. The search for alternative energy routes and new prospective partners in the region meshed well with the political philosophy of Ankara's leading foreign-policy planners whose stated goal was to have "zero problems" with neighbors, including in the South Caucasus.

Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement: A Tall Order

The Turkish-Armenian normalization has become an important element of the emerging new geopolitical setup in the South Caucasus.⁴ There seem to be two sets of country-specific factors that have influenced Turkey's and Armenia's in-

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international conduct and nudged the two sides toward rapprochement.

Turkey appears to be seeking to mend ties with Armenia for three main reasons. First, normalization with Yerevan

is likely to enhance Turkey’s geopolitical stature in the Caucasus region. Second, it will arguably help kick-start the stagnating process of the EU accession – primarily by demonstrating to Brussels that Ankara could be a key security provider in the strategically important Caspian-Black Sea region. Finally, better ties with Armenia could remove a painful aspect currently present in US-Turkish relations – the one that could potentially wreak havoc to Ankara’s ties with Washington, namely the possible recognition of the Armenian genocide by US lawmakers.

For its part, today’s Armenia is a small, weak, impoverished, landlocked and isolated country. It has survived the Turkish blockade, but further economic development, to say nothing of prosperity, is out of the question if the current situation persists. Furthermore, Yerevan badly needs to recalibrate its geopolitical orientation – specifically, to balance the highly pronounced Russian vector with a more robust opening up toward Europe and the U.S. The Russia-Georgia war appears to have made this need ever more acute.

It is the above factors that seem to be behind the year-long Turkish-Armenian talks which resulted in last October’s ceremony of the signing of unprecedented bilateral accords in Zurich. But those factors are acting against the backdrop of an extremely complex and tragic historical legacy.

It is important to understand that Turkey and Armenia are not any regular neighboring countries: both were shaped as nations following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and they still find themselves in the midst of the painful process of post-imperial readjustment. Turkey and Armenia appear to be still sorting out the consequences of what Rogers Brubaker would call the “post-imperial unmixing of peoples” – the process that took on particularly atrocious forms in the Ottoman Anatolia in the early 20th century.

The clash between the two incipient nationalisms led, literally, to the “struggle to the death” that resulted not only in the untold human losses but also in the deep-seated mistrust between the two peoples. It is this mistrust that the present-day leaders in Ankara and Yerevan are struggling to overcome.

Again, it involves more than the Turkey-Armenia bilateral relationship. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – itself a product of yet another imperial collapse – is



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definitely a part of the mix although it is not mentioned in the signed protocols. But the Karabakh dispute inevitably brings Turkey's and Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan into an already complex equation. Hence Turkey's strategic dilemma: how to normalize relations with Armenia without ruining its special ties with Baku. Judging by Azerbaijan's nervous, if not outright hostile, reaction to the signing of the protocols, solving this dilemma appears to be a tall order indeed.

Ideally, the healing of the greater Caucasus' post-imperial wounds and the normalization of Turkish-Armenian and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations should proceed along parallel courses. In fact, this ideal scenario appears to be the only viable one if we want to see a comprehensive settlement. However, the fundamental lack of trust between the main actors (which is reflected in, among other things, the ambivalent wordings of the protocols) and their often-erratic domestic politics threaten to block or even derail altogether the normalization process.

Russia's Strategic Objective: Preserving the Leadership Role

The reconciliation between Ankara and Yerevan would be an indisputable boon for both the two old foes and the region at large. However, for the tremendously complex and fragile process to come to fruition, the positive attitude of

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the outside great powers is key. Yet while Washington has been very supportive of a Turkish-Armenian reconciliation, the Kremlin appears to be reluctant to welcome too close a rapprochement between Turkey and its main strategic ally

in the Caucasus. True to its ingrained imperial instincts, Moscow seems to prefer to "divide and rule."

A significant improvement in relations between Ankara and Yerevan, most US strategists contend, would not only contribute to stabilizing the volatile South Caucasus but also reduce Armenia's political and economic dependence on Russia and Iran – which is clearly in American interests.

Russia's position appears to be much more ambivalent. It would seem that Russia fully enjoys its status of the *Ordnungsmacht* in the South Caucasus, is perfectly aware that not a single issue can be resolved without its participation, and skillfully manipulates the multiple regional rifts, jealousies and rivalries in order to maximize its influence.

In the wake of the Georgia war, Moscow, mindful of its serious image problem, has been keen on casting itself as an indispensable mediator and peacekeeper in the Caucasus. Thus the Kremlin not only decided it would be prudent to express its support for the Turkish-Armenian normalization but also – clearly seeking to offset Ankara's foreign-policy activism – raised its own profile as the key mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh talks. The signing of the Moscow Declaration by the presidents of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2008 was meant to send a signal that it is Russia who calls all the shots in the Caucasus, particularly in the resolution of the region's "frozen conflicts." Furthermore, Moscow appeared to have a largely benign view of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement as this would isolate Georgia and put additional pressure on the intransigent and anti-Russian leadership in Tbilisi. For its part, Ankara has been going out of its way to allay whatever suspicions the Kremlin might have, stressing that it has no intentions to undermine Russia's strategic interests or challenge its leadership in the South Caucasus.

But to be sure, Moscow could not be absolutely sanguine about Turkey and Armenia coming closer together. The latter is considered Russia's main geopolitical and military ally in the Caucasus: Armenia, where around 5,000 Russian troops are deployed, provides Russia with a strategic foothold south of Georgia and between Turkey and Iran. It's clear that Armenia's "geopolitical loyalty" and reliance on

Moscow stem mainly from the country's geo-strategic isolation. At the same time, the Russian-Armenian relationship is not completely unproblematic. There are several important issues where Moscow's and Yerevan's interests seem to diverge. These are the price for gas that Armenia imports from Russia; the controversies over a number of Armenian industrial enterprises that Russia acquired in the "assets for debts" deals but that did not receive the promised investment; the Russian military base in Gyumri for which Moscow does not pay the rent; and the nature of relations between Russia and Azerbaijan, which, some in Yerevan argue, does not sit well with the Russian rhetoric about the strategic alliance with Armenia.

The opening of the Turkish-Armenian border would result in the serious reduction of Russia's political and economic influence both in Armenia and in the region at large

It is the dissatisfaction with certain Russian policies coupled with a general desire to have closer relations with the West that are behind Armenia's search for a more diversified foreign policy. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to understand that the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border would result in the serious reduction of Russia's political and economic influence both in Armenia and in the region at large. By the same token, were the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh to be miraculously resolved, Moscow would immediately lose a crucial geopolitical leverage it currently has with both Yerevan and Baku.

So Russia is pursuing a subtle balancing act in the Caucasus. It encourages the two sets of talks – between Turkey and Armenia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan – to continue, cleverly reiterates that the two issues are not linked (while being perfectly aware that in real life it's very difficult to separate them) and, ideally, would like all the parties to keep on negotiating ad infinitum – without producing any tangible results and in the process growing ever more dependent on Moscow. According to one cogent analysis, Russian strategy "consists of keeping Armenia beholden to Russia, building up ties with Azerbaijan by fostering the split between Turkey and Azerbaijan over the Armenia issue, strengthening cooperation with Turkey in regional and energy issues, and keeping the United States from getting too involved in the negotiations — all while appearing like the region's benevolent mediator."⁵

Conclusion

Recent developments appear to indicate that, for good or ill, Russia remains the principal power in the Caucasus. In the immediate aftermath of the Georgia

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war, Turkey, sensing that Russia's international image got tainted, rushed into the region with a set of bold foreign-policy initiatives, including the Caucasus Security and Cooperation Platform and normalization with Armenia. But the South Caucasus – the region where neighbors have seemingly irreconcilable problems with each other – has put Ankara's "zero problems with neighbors"

policy to a severe test. It would seem that Turkey's leadership naively believed that their good relations with Moscow would somehow induce the Kremlin to put pressure on Armenia to make it more amenable to a compromise on the Karabakh issue. But the Kremlin of course was in no hurry to grant Turkey its wish of an Armenian rapprochement. Instead, Moscow seized on a golden opportunity to teach Ankara a good lesson by demonstrating that Turkey is not capable of creating peace and stability in the Caucasus whereby Russia's influence would be diminished.

Feeling that it is in control of the situation and being aware of all the obstacles impeding the Turkish-Armenian normalization, Moscow simply let the events run their natural course. It would seem that Russia's calculation proved to be correct. Due to domestic and regional complications, the attempts at a rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan appear to have already run aground. Furthermore, the seasonal congressional maneuvering in the U.S. over the issue of Armenian genocide risks making matters even worse. Any move by the Congress that Ankara would perceive as unfriendly would not only doom the Turkish-Armenian protocols but also seriously undermine the relationship with the U.S.

Having ambitiously set out to become a key power in its Caucasus neighborhood, Turkey seems to have ended up pretty much empty-handed: no deal with Yerevan, frictions with Baku, and strained ties with Washington. Moscow diplomats are too well groomed to show that they are deeply satisfied with such an outcome. But make no mistake – they certainly are.

Endnotes

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