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# Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and the Caucasus

## Report

**Original citation:**

Oskanian, Kevork (2011) Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and the Caucasus. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR007. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43497/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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## Turkey and the Caucasus

Kevork Oskanian

**T**urkey has had long-standing links with the region called the ‘South(ern) Caucasus’, comprised of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, including the de-facto independent entities of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The area was, for a long time, the scene of intense competition between the Persian-Sassanid and Ottoman Empires, before its gradual incorporation into the Russian Empire during the first half of the 19th century. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey has become a major regional player through direct investments, and the trade and transportation links tying the Caspian basin to the outside world over Georgia in circumvention of Russian territory, most important among them the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. But the weight of both history and ethnic kinship has distorted the operation of material interests, even under Ankara’s new, zero-problems foreign policy. The historical legacies of massacre and conflict during and after World War One continue to weigh down on relations between Turkey and Armenia, and the close political interaction between Ankara and Baku – encapsulated in the slogan ‘One nation, two states’ – remains a major ethno-political factor shaping the regional environment.

### **TURKEY, THE SOUTH CAUCASUS, AND THE RUSSIA FACTOR**

Turkey’s role in the South Caucasus cannot be analysed separately from its broader relationship with the Russian Federation – which has seen a considerable evolution since the early years following the Cold War, when some officials in Moscow and Turkey traded threats during Armenian military advances in the region in May 1992. Initially, many analysts and policymakers in the West assumed Turkey would quickly fill the perceived strategic vacuum left by Moscow in the former Soviet states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. By the second half of the 1990s, these hopes largely subsided, as most dictatorships of the region either went into isolation (as in the case of Turkmenistan), or largely realigned with Moscow. Meanwhile, the Turkish economic crisis of 2001 caused Ankara to concentrate its efforts at improving its economy during the first years of this century, rather than expanding its political influence abroad. This led to renewed efforts aimed at joining the EU, alongside a drive to expand economic relations with the former Soviet Union and, specifically, the Russian Federation.

By the end of the 1990s, relations between Turkey and Russia had begun to improve. With the war in Chechnya no longer affecting Turkish domestic sensibilities, and the BTC-pipeline a *fait accompli*, the focus shifted from competition over energy routes – with Turkey as the major pathway preferred by the West – to the benefits of increased bilateral trade. Turkish conglomerates became major players in the Russian construction sector; and the completion of the Blue Stream pipeline across the Black Sea in 2003 turned Gazprom into Turkey’s main supplier of natural gas, making Russia the country’s largest trading partner by 2008. Ankara had also become more deferential towards Russia’s regional geo-strategic interests – a deference that increased in parallel with an enhanced independence from the West with the advent of the AKP government in 2003. Slighted by the EU in its European aspirations

and irritated by US policies in (northern) Iraq, Ankara aimed to maximise its alternatives, including within the former Soviet Union. These developments also coincided with the shift in Turkish foreign policy from the realist isolationism and explicit Western orientation of orthodox Kemalism, to the more activist, 'zero-problems' policies encapsulated in the term 'Strategic Depth' – an active engagement with the outside world aimed at maximising the policy options available to Turkey, centred on the former Ottoman territories and borderlands in the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Balkans.

Within the Caucasus (and, more generally, the former Soviet Union), the 'strategic depth' approach incorporates a general concern by Ankara to maintain the existing status quo, as well as to avoid offending Russian sensibilities. Turkey has generally taken a dim view of major upheavals in its neighbourhood – including the colour revolutions in the Ukraine and Georgia – and was genuinely alarmed during the 2008 August war, which brought home in stark relief its difficult position between East and West. Concerned at being excluded from major political developments in the region that may affect its economic interest in maintaining its position as an energy and transportation hub, and aiming to continue an engagement with, in particular, Russia, Erdogan resurrected an idea – earlier proposed by his predecessor, Süleyman Demirel – of a Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform '*without the participation of extra-regional powers*'. Touted as a forum aimed at promoting regional peace, cooperation and economic development, it was meant to include Turkey, Russia, and the three Southern Caucasian states, but pointedly excluded Western powers, fitting well into the multi-dimensional and increasingly independent nature of Turkey's policy of 'strategic depth'.

## **TURKEY AND THE THREE SOUTHERN CAUCASIAN STATES: BETWEEN FRIENDSHIP, COOPERATION AND HOSTILITY**

Ankara's bilateral relationships with the three South Caucasian states have combined promotion of the national interest with a prudent deference for Russia's core regional concerns. In short, Turkey maintains close co-operation with Georgia, mainly centred on economic matters, but refrains from taking sides in Tbilisi's troubled relationship with Moscow. Its relationship with Armenia is deeply problematic – in the absence of formal diplomatic links between the two capitals, the border between these two states remains firmly shut to bilateral trade and travel. By contrast, Ankara's ties with Baku have consistently remained extremely close; Baku sees its larger Turkic neighbour as a natural strategic partner, something Russia does not object to provided its military-strategic prerogatives are not directly challenged. In the southern Caucasus, Turkey's 'zero-problems' approach seems to be circumscribed by Russia's volatile relationship with Georgia, and the intractability of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two issues over which Ankara has little direct influence.

## **TURKEY AND GEORGIA**

Turkey has had to tread carefully in its relationship with Georgia, the most pro-Western of the South Caucasian states. While Tbilisi's westwards lurch began well before the Rose Revolution-proper, the rise to power of the vocally anti-Russian Saakashvili presented Turkey with the problem of how to balance its formal alliance with the United States with its prudent policies vis-à-vis its trading partner Russia. Any participation by Ankara in the Train and Equip Programmes designed to upgrade Georgia's military infrastructure to NATO standards was, accordingly, lukewarm and piecemeal – largely limited to the upgrading and reconstruction of Georgian military bases and the sale of light military materiel. In addition, Turkey's broader strategy of expanding its position

as an energy and transportation hub situated at the crossroads between Europe and Central Asia created a common interest with Tbilisi in routing energy and transportation links from the Caspian over Georgian (and subsequently Turkish) territory. While the BTC pipeline is now operational, proposed infrastructure projects including the Nabucco gas pipeline clearly put Turkey and Georgia on the opposing side of a geopolitical argument with Moscow.

Ankara's close economic relations with Tbilisi are also potentially complicated by the presence of a large and active North Caucasian diaspora within the country. The related Circassian and Abkhaz communities were active in breaking the trade embargo against the breakaway region well before the August war of 2008, and these economic links have increased since their recognition by Moscow that year, adding to the possibility of friction with Georgia notwithstanding the presence of overarching shared strategic interests. It is precisely this precarious position between two hostile sides – Russia and the separatists on the one hand, and Georgia and its Western partners on the other – that drives Ankara's desire to avoid having to take sides, resulting in initiatives like the Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform and a continuing, delicate diplomatic balancing act.

## **TURKEY AND ARMENIA**

Turkey's most unambiguously problematic relationship in the Southern Caucasus is with the Republic of Armenia – weighed down by both history, and the tight ethno-cultural links between Ankara and Baku. While both sides recognise each other, they have no diplomatic relations; their land border has remained closed since April 1993, in reaction to Armenian military advances in Azerbaijan. Turkish policymakers – including those of the AKP – have since formulated three basic conditions for the establishment of formal links and the opening of the land border: first, an explicit recognition of the current land border delineated by the treaties of Moscow and Kars by Yerevan; second, an end to Armenia's efforts to

have the 1915 massacres of the Ottoman Armenian minority internationally recognised as genocide; and third, withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azeri territories. Armenia, on the other hand, has insisted on diplomatic relations and open borders 'without preconditions'.

The events of August 2008 gave renewed impetus to efforts by both governments to set aside their deep-seated differences, in a hitherto frustrated attempt to do away with one of Ankara's major obstacles towards a 'zero problems' Southern Caucasus. On the one hand, Turkey was reminded of the geopolitical vulnerability of its links to Central Asia through Georgian territory. On the other hand, Armenia was made painfully aware of its dependence on Georgian transit routes for 70% of its trade with the outside world. In what came to be called 'football diplomacy', president Sargsyan of Armenia invited his Turkish counterpart to the world cup qualifying match between the two countries in Yerevan in September that year – the first visit ever by a Turkish head of state to the Armenian capital. Abdullah Gul reciprocated two months later by inviting Sargsyan for the return match in the Turkish city of Sivas. The invitations were the result of several years of behind-the-scenes negotiations between the two sides, under Swiss mediation and with the strong encouragement of both Russia and the United States. In April 2009, the process culminated in the signing of protocols between the two governments: Armenia recognised the current border, an intergovernmental commission would tackle all outstanding issues (including historical ones) between the two states, while the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was left outside the formal scope of the normalisation process.

Turkey had multiple motives in moving towards normalisation with Armenia. On a general level, they fit into the 'zero-problems' policy formulated by AKP policymakers, whereby outstanding issues with all neighbours are to be addressed pro-actively. Several more specific reasons for the move have also been suggested, including the possible use of Armenia as an alternative to Georgia as a transit route for

energy and transportation; averting recognition of the 1915 massacres as genocide by US Congress on the eve of their 100th anniversary; and mitigating Armenia's stance in the Karabakh conflict through growing economic interdependence and civil-society interaction with Turkey. Crucially, Moscow – confident in its strategic dominance over Armenia's economy – seemed to approve of the rapprochement.

Now, nearly two years later, the process seems to have at best, stalled, or at worst resulted in complete failure, despite the overwhelming support from the international community. Under domestic pressure and in reaction to Azerbaijan's vehement opposition, Ankara has linked any ratification of the protocols by its parliament to 'progress' in the negotiations surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Yerevan's reaction has been to suspend its formal approval of the documents, on condition of their renewed decoupling by Turkey from its conflict with Baku. As things stand, the improvement of bilateral Turkish-Armenian relations seems once again dependent on a final breakthrough in the OSCE-led negotiations surrounding the breakaway territory, or a volte-face by Ankara, both of which seem unlikely at this point.

## **TURKEY AND AZERBAIJAN**

Relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan are extremely close, although they do sometimes fail to live up to the oft-utilised slogan 'one nation, two states' – as during recent diplomatic spats over the pricing of gas supplies and efforts at Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. Ethno-linguistically, among former Soviet Turkic ethnic groups, Azeris relate most closely to the Anatolian Turks – the languages are largely mutually intelligible, and, with both societies largely secularised, the religious difference between the largely Shi'ite Azeris and Sunni Turks has become irrelevant. The large Azeri diaspora in Turkey adds to the inter-human links between the two societies, apart from acting as a foreign policy lobby in its own right on occasion. During the first years of independence – and, in particular, the ill-fated presidency of the late Abufaz Elchibey of the

Azeri Popular Front – Azerbaijan's foreign policy was based on an explicit adherence to the principles of pan-Turkism (the idea that ethnic Turkic peoples throughout the Eurasian landmass would have to unite politically), and a corresponding vehemently anti-Russian and pro-Turkish/Western stance. Since the advent to power of the Aliyevs, Baku has taken care to pursue a 'balanced and independent' foreign policy, one that aims to walk a tightrope between maintaining its independence and not provoking the geopolitical sensitivities of its large northern neighbour, which did not refrain from intervening extensively in domestic Azeri politics in the first, chaotic years of its independence.

Both countries are closely tied economically as well: beyond Georgia, Turkey is the main conduit for Azerbaijan's oil exports – through the BTC pipeline – and, potentially, gas exports (through the proposed Nabucco pipeline). Last but not least, military co-operation between Baku and Ankara started in the first years of the former's independence, with much of the Azeri officer corps receiving extensive training in Turkey; it has currently been expanded through a defence pact providing for mutual military assistance by either side in the event of an attack by a third party, the joint production of weaponry, deepened military co-operation through joint training and exercise programmes, and logistical co-operation. While this was the first time Azerbaijan formalised such close military-strategic co-operation with a NATO member, it does remain unlikely that Turkey would actually infringe on Russia's strategic space by directly intervening in a renewed conflict between Azerbaijan and CSTO member Armenia, or building bases on Azeri territory. This implicit understanding seems to underwrite Russia's hitherto restrained reaction to the deal.

## **PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE**

Turkey's position in the Southern Caucasus has been dependent on a number of factors: a balancing of its NATO commitments with its excellent economic (and increasingly, political) relationship with the

Russian Federation; its shared interest with Georgia in positioning itself as a transit hub for hydrocarbons from the Caspian basin; its ethnic kinship with Azerbaijan and the ensuing domestic pressure to support Baku in its conflict with Yerevan; and its historically fraught relationship with Armenia. In terms of the 'strategic depth' doctrine, the major initiatives undertaken by the AKP government since 2003 aimed at creating a zone of 'zero problems' in that particular section of Turkey's neighbourhood have not resulted in major changes in the region's strategic landscape. In contrast to recent developments in the Middle East, Turkey's priorities and alignments within the South Caucasus remain relatively unchanged – and any progress over the past decade has been, at most, incremental. The Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform has come to naught – in no small part due to Ankara and Yerevan's failure to come to an understanding on the many issues still dividing them: first among them, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Along with renewed hostilities between Russia and Georgia, this conflict poses perhaps the greatest challenge to Turkey's policies in the region. In the absence of a final peace agreement, renewed warfare between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains a distinct possibility in coming years. Ankara would have to make difficult decisions in such an eventuality, making its regional balancing act vis-à-vis Russia even more difficult than it is today. Turkey's lack of direct influence over the peace process itself (it remains outside the OSCE troika carrying out formal negotiations between the parties) is proving increasingly frustrating to its policymakers. In the Southern Caucasus at least, Turkey's historical and religious-ethnic ties have at best proven a mixed blessing in terms of contemporary policymaking. ■

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