

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GEORGIAN-SOUTH OSSETIAN CONFLICT FOR TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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In the 20th century, the world reconciled itself to the Soviet Union's influence in the Caucasus and the Central Asian Region. The West, particularly the U.S., wanted to be a major if not the main actor in this power game after the collapse of the Soviet system. Its first goal, cer-

tainly, was to gain control over the wealthy oil and natural gas reserves of the Caucasian and Central Asian nations, but its next goal was no less significant: diverting oil around Russia and preventing Moscow from reasserting its control over the Caucasus and Central Asia. Georgia was preferred as the primary pro-Western state for secure transportation of the huge oil and gas prosperity of the neighboring regions. So when the main Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline for transporting oil through Georgia was completed in 2005, it was hailed as the most important success U.S. strategy had scored over Russia and helped to diversify its energy deliveries, given the instability of the Middle East.

Now energy experts declare that the hostilities between Russia and Georgia could intimidate America's plans to gain access to more of Central Asia's energy resources. At the other end of the continent are China and India whose desire for energy will keep the struggle for supplies going, as well as increase pressure to hike oil and gas prices. Georgia and the Caucasus, under the observant eyes of Russia, whose imperial desires are not loathe to resorting to military methods, no longer appear to be the safe passage for oil and gas as was formerly believed. Western states and multinationals, as well as the Central Asian and Caspian governments, may now be more unwilling to build new pipelines or move large volumes of energy resources along this corridor. One thing is certain: Russia headed by a leader who sees his country's future path to global power through the monopolization of energy resources and pipelines and who has demonstrated his inclination to use armed force to tame dissidents to that end will be the main actor in determining the region's energy future. This issue threatens to dash the hopes of the U.S. and its Western allies of reducing their dependence on oil supplies from the Middle East and shifting them to the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The most recent Russian attack on Georgia has left American policy, intended to drive a wedge between Russia and the old Soviet Central Asian countries, in a quandary. The success achieved by the BTC pipeline could not be repeat-

ed in order to move oil out of Kazakhstan via a non-Russia route. A large portion of oil from the rich Tengiz fields¹ passes through the northern Caspian to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiisk. This new pipeline is called the Caspian Pipeline Consortium. It had optional routes in the planning phase, but the Russian threat consolidated the present route.

Georgia is very important for the EU in terms of energy security. It is the only country where pipelines transporting natural gas and oil from the Caspian area that do not cross Russian territory can be laid. In other words, in the event it can protect its territorial integrity, Georgia is the only state that alleviates the West's heavy dependence on Russia. However, it is aware that it will now be very difficult to keep the South Ossetians' desire for independence under control, especially after Kosovo's independence, which was promoted and willingly allowed by the Europeans. South Ossetia might well become Georgia's Chechnia. The recent escalation of military conflicts has put the probability of a sustainable resolution off even more.

The only probable way out of this political crisis is to freeze the process as soon as possible. This is an absolute requirement before Moscow arms every Abkhazian and Ossetian and the two states become an open field for international hostility. This is why the Western bloc had a serious talk with Russia about its intentions concerning NATO's enlargement. The U.S. must stop its aggressive policy of installing new defense missile systems in Eastern Europe. Georgian President Saakashvili must desist from talking as though he is already a NATO member. Moscow must accept the status-quo and the territorial integrity of Georgia. The Russians should recognize that any territorial change in the map of the Caucasus may result in disturbance throughout the whole region. The separatist region of South Ossetia in Georgia is encouraging, with Russian air force attacking military targets inside Georgia, separatists in Georgia's another breakaway region

¹ Chevron is the biggest investor in this venture.

to launch attacks against Georgian military installations; the Southern Caucasus seems to be on the brink of a major military conflict between Georgia and Russia and its allies. This conflict appears to be the logical consequence of the increasing hostility on all sides over the past four years. With both conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia unsettled but silent since the early 1990s, it was not until current Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in 2004 that things began to warm up. To be sure, Georgia has the right to have its sovereignty and territorial integrity appreciated and the independence plan for South Ossetia put forward by Saakashvili in 2005 was generous by any international standards, but fell, of course, short of South Ossetia's demands for independence.²

The genealogy of this conflict, however, reaches back much further in history. The Ossetians were always considered to be one of the few Caucasus peoples loyal to Russia—the czar, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia. They live on both sides of the recent border between Russia and Georgia. Those who ended up in independent Georgia in 1991, saw their language, identity, and traditions endangered by the virulently nationalist Georgian state. Backed by Russia, they launched an insurgent campaign aimed at achieving rapid secession from Georgia.

So the most possible outcome in the near future, but almost certainly not after more blood-letting and civilian suffering, is an internationally brokered ceasefire and withdrawal of both

sides to the former status quo. This, of course, is only a short-term solution and not one that will be very permanent since low-level conflicts are likely to continue as they have over the past few years.³ At the same time, Georgia, Russia, and the Ossetians will not be able to find a permanent solution themselves. They have tried for many years, with different degrees of success, and failed, so there is a clear need for international negotiation.

With the OSCE likely to be paralyzed between the pro- and anti-Russian camps, and the U.S. heading into an all-important presidential election, the EU, which has an exacting interest in the region and has made a long-term commitment to it by incorporating it into the European Neighborhood Policy⁴ and appointing a special representative, might be the best-placed player to assist in this confrontation and may well establish its worth as an aspiring global conflict manager in the Southern Caucasus. This does not mean that the EU could do this alone, but it needs to show the way in managing this crisis, liaising intimately with all the other players, and using its increasing weight and strategic interests in the region to stop another war in the Caucasus. The more the Europeans and Americans try to make inroads into Russia's backyard, the tougher and more hostile Russia will become. While actual combat in Georgia is over, the real battle is just beginning. And this war has far-reaching consequences for Turkey.

³ See: X. Kurowska, "More than a Balkan Crisis Manager: The EUJUST Themis in Georgia," in: *European Security and Defence Policy*, ed. by M. Merlingen, London, 2008, S. 97-110.

⁴ See: W. Schneider-Deters, *Die Europäische Union, Russland und Eurasien: die Rückkehr der Geopolitik*, BWV, Berliner Wiss.-Verl., Berlin, 2008. 656 S.

² See: G. Simon, "Farbenrevolutionen—zur Demokratie?: Ukraine, Georgien, Kirgistan; Rückblick nach drei Jahren," *Europäische Rundschau: Vierteljahresschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Zeitgeschichte*, No. 36 (2), 2008, S. 65-71.

Georgia's Resolve to Join NATO

Georgia, whose membership in NATO was prohibited by Russia at a NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 because of its regional problems with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is looking

to resolve its problems by relying on its own methods to become integrated into the world. The Georgian administration, which is ready to maintain close ties with the EU and become a NATO member as soon as possible, seeks to decrease Russian influence by regularly raising tension in the region.⁵

Saakashvili, who wants to make his small Caucasus nation a member of NATO, has placed top priority on regaining control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another problematic region on the Black Sea. At stake are Russia's already nervous relations with the U.S. as well as Saakashvili's hopes of leading his country into the NATO alliance within the next year.

Georgia's president, Mikhail Saakashvili, has made joining NATO and the EU one of his top priorities. But there is disagreement among NATO members on whether to consider Georgian membership. For example, Germany favored avoiding an argument with Russia. At the summit in Bucharest in April 2008, NATO members declined to set an agenda for including Georgia. The Russian government claimed that in order to prevent NATO's enlargement in the Caucasus, Russia had to prevent Georgia from resolving its ethnoterritorial issues. The Georgian president's conclusion, of course, was the opposite: Georgia would be able to join NATO only if it could control South Ossetia as well as Abkhazia.

Turkey is the only NATO country bordering on Georgia. Any possible membership extended to Georgia, which Saakashvili so fervently yet unrealistically demands, will put Turkey right in the middle of a possible military disagreement with Russia. In the event of a war, controlling the straits under Turkey's influence will be key. *As the recent case of U.S. ships crossing* the Turkish straits under the Montreux Agreement showed, Turkey will be hard-pressed to maintain a position of balance between NATO and Moscow.

After Kosovo's declaration of independence Putin stated he was already making plans for revenge. Ukraine's NATO membership and the missile shield in Poland would be permanently enhanced in the area. Russia sees this as proof of the deception that NATO still exists while its competitor, the Warsaw Pact, has long disintegrated and, what is more, it is trying to extend its borders deep into formerly Russia-controlled areas. However, Russia, which has 11 time zones from east to west, a total area 22 times larger than Turkey's, large energy resources, a rich cultural legacy, and a strong national identity, requires its voice to be heard in international affairs. It sometimes wants to play the Kosovo card, sometimes the energy card, sometimes the Abkhazia card, and sometimes the Ossetia card in order to get this voice heard. While it is cautiously avoiding any abrasive policy with the West, Moscow has sided with countries seeking multipolarity, such as China and Iran, within the support of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), objected to Ukraine's and Georgia's membership in NATO, developed miracle weapons systems that would cancel the U.S. defense systems, and reintroduced flights over the Antarctic regions in order to challenge the current order.

The U.S. has utilized NATO as a security alliance to enlarge its pressure beyond the Euro-Atlantic region. NATO has effectively completed its enlargement to the East European and Baltic states. The recent Ukrainian and Georgian governments have articulated their desire to join NATO. That gives the U.S. the opportunity to extend its authority. Of course Russia obstinately opposed the further expansion of NATO. Russia regards Ukraine and Georgia as part of its own security parameters and NATO as a lever of American influence.⁶

⁵ See: S. Genç, "Could South Ossetia Become Kosovo?" *Today's Zaman*, 10 August, 2008, available at [www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=149814&bolum=109].

⁶ See: M. Seliger, "Georgien, Russland und der Fünf-Tage-Krieg: Fragen & Antworten," *Loyal: Magazin für Sicherheitspolitik*, No. 9, 2008, S. 6-7.

Turkey and the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict

Turkey has close strategic, historical, economic, and ethnic links with all parties in the conflict. For that reason, Turkey has to take all of these into consideration. The conflict is a disaster for civilian populations, who now find their lives literally in ruins, and is also demoralizing for Georgia's neighbors. Russia has accused Ukraine of being party to genocide by supporting Georgia's army and included Turkey in these accusations for signing a modest defense agreement. Turkey has tried to follow a soft method—encouraging a more independent Georgia as part of an energy and transportation corridor outside Moscow's control. At the same time, Russia is one of the most important trading partner and, historically, Turkey is careful about pulling the Kremlin tiger by the tail. Ankara may add its voice to the U.S. and EU efforts to impose an Olympic truce, but Russia has not yet shown any eagerness to listen.⁷

Turkey is one of the most receptive countries worried about the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. What can and could Turkey do for Georgian-South Ossetian conflict? Among Turkey's foreign policy priorities are the European Union, Cyprus, and the Middle East. Turkey should include the Caucasus among those priorities because Turkey shares a border with the Caucasus and because it is the only country in the world that shares a common bond with all the peoples of the Caucasus. As a result, the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency's (TİKA) influence in the region should be increased in order to implement economic, educational, and cultural projects in the region. Turkish civil society organizations that want to be active in the region should also boldly step forward.

Turkey has made it clear that it does not support separatist movements because of the similar problems that Azerbaijan and itself have been facing. For this reason, it supports the territorial integrity of states with separatist problems. However, it also has refrained from moves that will harm its sensitive relations with Russia.

Turkey may assume a role of arbitration in this conflict as it has in Middle Eastern conflicts because Russia's participation and the voluntary support of the Caucasian peoples will make the conditions harder for Georgia. Georgia asked for Turkey's support when Russia became involved in the war and started bombing peaceful areas outside the war zone.⁸ The situation is sensitive for Turkey. Ankara receives more than 30% of its natural gas from Russia, so Turkey should assume the role of mediator to ensure that the issue is discussed in U.N. circles and that peace is maintained. And, of course, Turkey should consider the humanitarian view of the conflict and supply support aid for the people in the conflict zone.

There are several aspects to the Georgian-South Ossetian war. Turkey cannot regard it as a simple Georgian-South Ossetian-Russian war. Russia is in the middle of the conflict. Turkey supports Georgia because of their strategic ties. In addition, Turkey favors Georgia's territorial integrity in principle because Azerbaijan is immersed in a similar problem in Karabakh. On the other hand, the northern Caucasian peoples in Turkey support South Ossetia. There is a sizeable Cau-

⁷ See: M.K. Kaya, S.E. Cornell, "Turkey and the Georgian War: A Bungled Stability Initiative," *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 1, No. 12, 29 August, 2008.

⁸ See: S. Oğan, "Gürcistan-Güney Osetya savaşında cephe genişlerken, Gürcistan kaybediyor," (...As Georgia Loses), *Zaman*, 11 August, 2008.

casian diaspora in Turkey that generally supports South Ossetia. Moreover, Turkey has deepened its strategic relations with Russia. In this case, Turkey cannot be expected to take sides with either party.⁹

Turkish public opinion is obviously on Georgia's side. There is a considerable ethnic Georgian population. Russian bombs have fallen on either side of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Turkish trade and tourism are being damaged more and more as the conflict goes on. Another reason for Turkey's anxiety is that Georgia is a transit country for Turkey. The country hosts important pipelines and transportation corridors. The BTC pipeline, the Shah Deniz-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku (KTB) railway project are all factors that multiply Turkey's concerns. It is well known that Turkey equips Georgian military, provides technological support for the Georgian army, and even repaired a military airport in that country. In general, Turkey extends military support to Georgia. The Russian press has emphasized that Turkey is at the top of the list of countries giving support to Georgia.¹⁰

Turkey's Suggestion of a "Caucasian Alliance"

Turkey is looking for a pact that is mainly concentrated on security, stability, and expansion with the participation of the Southern Caucasus, the Russian Federation, and Western countries. The key areas of concern in this pact will be the reorganization of the Caucasian republics' economies, ensuring development and cooperation, boosting economic cooperation with the world, fostering free trade, supporting the private sector, ensuring environmental protection, putting to use existing and future energy and transportation lines extending from the east to the west, adapting the administrative structure, ensuring administrative transparency, tackling immigrant issues and ensuring their integration, as well as similar issues.¹¹

Turkey has not taken any important steps during this conflict, apart from taking humanitarian precautions. It has adopted a passive policy. It did not move toward an active policy until 11 and 12 August when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül made public statements.¹²

Turkey launched an active foreign policy plan with the statements made by Prime Minister Erdoğan on 11 August and President Gül on 12 August. Since Sarkozy was representing the EU as the term president, and not France, Erdoğan was the first prime minister to visit Tbilisi since the conflict in Georgia began. Turkey's official attendance in Tbilisi was the right foreign policy move. Erdoğan's delegation included Foreign Minister Ali Babacan and Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister Ahmet Davudoğlu, signaling that Turkey will take care of the Caucasus as one of its foreign policy priorities.

⁹ See: S. İdiz, "Türkiye'yi Batı'ya iten Rusya'dır" (Russia Pushes Turkey to the West), *Milliyet*, 11 August, 2008.

¹⁰ See: Y. Poyraz, "Conflict in the Caucasus: Risk or Opportunity for Turkey?" *Today's Zaman*, 17 August, 2008.

¹¹ See: J. Senkyr, "Türkei schlägt Stabilitätspakt für den Kaukasus vor," 26 August, 2008, available at [www.kas.wf/doc/kas_14480-544-1-30.pdf].

¹² Erdoğan arrived in Moscow on 13 August and went to Tbilisi on 14 August, one day after French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

As far as the inconsistent performance and behavior of regional and extra-regional actors mentioned above are concerned, the Caucasus Alliance suggested by Turkey, boosted by an interdependence model of liberal thinking, rests on close economic relations and institutional ties and is extremely unlikely to generate any promising results in establishing permanent peace in the region. Actually, Turkey suggested a very similar plan with the same objectives in the 1990s. This met with complete rejection from the Armenian side, which claimed that it was against the national interests of both Armenia and Russia and that it was nothing but an aim to save the “old Pan-Turkish dream” of uniting all Turks from the Caucasus to Central Asia.¹³

In fact, the proposal Turkey is now making is something that has been discussed in international relation security studies for years, usually between liberal and realist security thinkers. Turkey’s suggestion of an “alliance” for the Caucasus takes its rational base from liberal views on security solutions that have become principal as responses to those of the state-centric realist opinion in interstate relations.

A “Caucasian Alliance” may be established along the lines of the Balkan Political Club, formed with the participation of former heads of state in the Balkans. By keeping the doors of dialog open at a high level, this may serve to put an end to the emerging conflicts. The Eurasian Cooperation Action Plan signed by and between Turkey and the Russian Federation on 6 November, 2001 may be refreshed with a vision to boost cooperation in economic, cultural, and educational issues with the Russian Federation in the Eurasian Region, as well as the Caucasus. Turkey may exert a lot of time and effort in reorganizing the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which was established in 1992 under the leadership of Turkey, in order to prevent the emergence of problems and conflicts in the region and to talk about political issues.¹⁴

The main problem haunting the search for cooperation in the Caucasus is the lack of adequate social, political and economic institutions in the Caucasian republics. It is very important to secure the territorial integrity of these republics and carry out successful democratic and economic reforms. For this reason, the support offered these countries is mainly aimed at restructuring democratic institutions, enhancing the economic structures, and fostering the development of civil society and law. The success of the Southern Caucasian countries is dependent on the development of democracy and civil society and making their economies part of the global economy, including the marketing of oil resources. Ensuring security, stability, and development in the region—including the Caucasus and Central Asia and extending from the Mediterranean to China—will help to bring Caucasian and Central Asian oil and natural gas to the international markets. It would be an advantageous and realistic move to launch a regional development program and a regional peace program with the participation of the Russian Federation and within the framework of the Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform.

Conclusions

One of the most unfortunate things for Turkey has always been that its neighbors have never been able to find a stable position in the international power structure or realize real peace. For example, the war in Iraq is still going on; Syria remains excluded from the international system; and Iran

¹³ See: J. Senkyr, “Ein schwieriger Balanceakt, Türkische Außenpolitik im Kaukasus,” *Die politische Meinung*, November 2008, S. 37.

¹⁴ See: M.K. Kaya, S.E. Cornell, op. cit.

has the dangerous potential of becoming the focus of an international clash because of its insatiable ambition to become a nuclear power. And there is no need to point out Turkey's problematic relations with another of its neighbors, Armenia.

Turkey's north-eastern neighbor Georgia, a country with which Turkey has had no problems for years vis-à-vis bilateral relations, has now become the center of a violent "power struggle" between the West and Russia. Only the consequence of this power struggle will decide whether Georgia will become a NATO member or not. And it seems that the winner of the first round of this great power struggle has been neither Tbilisi nor the West, but Russia.

After being swept to power four years ago on the back of a popular revolution called the Rose Revolution and welcomed by the West, Georgian leader Mikhail Saakashvili pledged to bring South Ossetia and Abkhazia back under Georgia's control. This has also been a requirement for Georgia in order to make the country entitled to potential NATO membership.

All the actors in the region know very well that there is much more at risk in the struggle than the future of the two small breakaway republics because it is clear that a much greater conflict than that is underway in the Caucasus today. One key is the recognition earlier this year by NATO and European Union countries of Kosovo's independence from Serbia. It is a well-known fact that Russia opposed this.¹⁵ On the other hand, it tried to turn the defeat to its benefit by pushing the argument that if Kosovo could be independent, so too could the Abkhazians and Ossetians. This was an important development in Russia's reaction to what it regards as balanced Western containment.

Now Turkey supports Georgia's territorial integrity. Any new small states in the region only create more problems and Turkey is extremely aware of this. But what will Turkey do if it is faced with making a choice between supporting Tbilisi and Abkhazia's struggle for independence? If Turkey acts with the Western bloc and supports Tbilisi, it will not only estrange the Abkhazians, who have a sizeable presence in Turkey, but will also be confronting Moscow. If it supports an independent state or more autonomy for the Abkhazians (and South Ossetians), it will find itself on a crash course with Europe and the U.S. In both scenarios, Turkey will be faced with a difficult situation. The only way to stop this existing conflict from turning into an all-out war is to persuade Russia to hold back and convince the Europeans to put off their Georgian plans. But it will take a huge amount of political capital and shuttle diplomacy to achieve any specific results before positions become ensconced and permanent steps are taken.

Because of its close proximity to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Turkey cannot easily ignore the region. Therefore Georgia is the key country in Turkey's contact with the Caucasus and Central Asia, given Ankara's problematic relations with Armenia. Turkey's role is all the more important given Iran's position and its conflict with the West.

Together with the South Caucasian countries and the Russian Federation, Turkey should work on the Stability and Cooperation Platform in the Caucasus. In order to prevent further clashes in the region and to ease the present ones, the Caucasian Alliance project—made up of intellectuals—should be supported with the participation of Turkish intellectuals and NGOs.

The Balkan Club could also be copied in the Caucasus in order to foster an informal dialog and thus prevent conflicts. Turkey and the Russian Federation could also reconsider the "Eurasia Cooperation Action Plan," which was signed on 16 November, 2001. In addition, the activity of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, which was established on Turkey's initiative, could be stepped up to include political developments as well.

¹⁵ See: M. Klein, "Die Beziehungen der EU zum Kaukasus: neue Dynamik ohne klare Strategie," *Die Genese einer Union der 27*, 2008, S. 331-350.

Tension will remain high in the region until the Russian Federation gets what it wants. Until Georgia makes up its mind about Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it will not be able to integrate into the European-Atlantic world. This war has shown Turkey that it needs to support policies aimed at maintaining peace with regional organizations and establishing bilateral relations in the Caucasus.
