

TURKISH POLICY IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

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ABSTRACT

Today, the Southern Caucasus is best described as a scene of geopolitical battles among Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as between the United States and the European Union. Each of the actors is pursuing its own political interests and nurturing its own ideas about the routes leading to the region's stability and its incorporation into the world community. To achieve this and to arrive at pragmatic political decisions fully tuned to the geopolitical realities, political scientists and other experts in international relations must study and identify the geopolitical trends prevailing in the Southern Caucasus in the context of Turkish geostrategy in the region.

The author analyzes the transformations in Turkey's foreign policy based on the

Zero Problems with Our Neighbors policy formulated by the republic's former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, which make Turkey's more active involvement in all spheres of its foreign political activities, building the Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku geopolitical axis as part of the Zero Problems with Our Neighbors policy, and establishing relations with Armenia a far from simple process. The first steps along this road have been taken: Turkey has formulated a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform; Armenia and Turkey have signed a roadmap and the Zurich Protocols (the ratification of which was suspended by the National Assembly of Armenia), while Ankara has been seeking brokerage in the Karabakh conflict.

KEYWORDS: *Turkey, the Southern Caucasus, geopolitical interests, foreign policy course, the Zero Problems with Our Neighbors policy, the Justice and Development Party, the Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku axis, Armenian-Turkish normalization.*

Introduction

For different reasons and for a long time, the Southern Caucasus remained outside the scope of Turkey's strategic interests. Everything changed when the Soviet Union fell apart, opening up new horizons for Ankara's political impacts. Today, its rising determination to become the key regional power is accompanied by its reduced role as a guarantor of NATO's borders and the slower pace of the talks on its EU membership.

Turkey's foreign policy course in the Southern Caucasus rests on three major issues.

- First, its regional ambitions demand more impressive economic and political might.
- Second, disintegration of the Soviet Union allowed Turkey to drop its main foreign policy principle, i.e. non-interference in regional processes and conflicts. This readjustment involved Turkey, directly and indirectly, in the developments in the Balkans and the Northern and Southern Caucasus. Its Zero Problems with Our Neighbors doctrine presupposes, among other things, support of the region's Muslim and Turkic peoples, which contradicts, to a certain extent, the EU policies. Moreover, within the North Atlantic Alliance, Ankara is following its own strategic course: in 2003, its parliament refused the coalition use of its territory for launching attacks on Iraq.
- Third, some think that stronger Turkic and Islamic factors in the country's new foreign policy course have already stirred up nationalist sentiments in some population groups.¹

The Ukrainian developments suggested that "separated by the Black Sea, the fate of Ukraine and the countries of the South Caucasus is intimately connected and that the South Caucasus is a most likely area for ... further geopolitical mayhem,"² an opinion shared by many; this means that the situation in the region will change dramatically. It is expected that Turkey, carried away by its ambitions, will find itself involved in the opposition between two extra-regional power centers and will remain devoted to its pragmatic foreign policy fully adjusted to its geostrategic interests in the region.

Today, Turkey has been showing its more active foreign policy involvement by contributing to the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia geopolitical alliance that is taking shape; it has already formulated the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform and made an attempt to normalize its relations with Armenia in the form of the two signed Protocols mentioned above; it claims one of the key roles in settling the Karabakh conflict and the status of an energy hub.

Turkey Readjusts Its Foreign Policy Course

The events that have been unfolding in the post-Soviet Southern Caucasus forced Ankara to revise its foreign policy course to claim the role of a regional power in its own right. It has succeeded thanks to its faster economic growth and the fundamentally new political situation inside the country: since 2002 the country has been dominated by the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party.

¹ See: M. Aydin, "Twenty Years Before, Twenty Years After: Turkish Foreign Policy at the Threshold of the 21st Century," in: *Turkish Foreign Policy in the 21st Century. A Changing Role in World Politics*, ed. by T. Ismael, M. Aydin, Ashgate, Burlington, 2003, pp. 16-17.

² See, for example: S.E. Cornell, "Checking Putin's Eurasian Ambitions," available at [online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303532704579476972067682740].

Disintegration of the Soviet Union allowed the country to abandon its fairly simple foreign policy ideas: Turkey as part of the Western world, loyalty to NATO, and involvement in the East-West confrontation. In a fairly narrow foreign policy framework, this course has allowed Turkey to reap political and economic dividends and enjoy guaranteed security.

Everything changed when the Soviet Union left the scene: Ankara had to revise its relationship with its neighbors. Ahmet Davutoğlu, professor at Istanbul University, formulated a new foreign policy concept and developed it in his *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position). The author based this new concept on a new foreign policy course suggested by the new balance of power and Turkey's central role in international relations justified by its unique geographic location at the crossroads of important sea, land, and air routes that tie together Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The author has also written that "it shifts Turkey's self-perception as being on the periphery to the understanding that the country is in the very center of important historical developments" and that it was not merely a member of secondary importance either of the EU or of NATO, or simply a part of Asia.³

When appointed foreign minister, he transformed his ideas into the Zero Problems with Our Neighbors doctrine, which presupposed that Turkey consolidate its regional position by pursuing a more constructive foreign policy.

Guided by the Justice and Development Party, Turkey is pursuing the following six foreign policy goals formulated by Davutoğlu:

- (1) achieving a new level of balance between security of the state and individual freedom;
- (2) achieving settlement of all disagreements with neighbors;
- (3) engaging in active diplomacy designed to avoid crises;
- (4) consistently strengthening relations with all states;
- (5) achieving the country's more active involvement in international organizations;
- (6) establishing the country's new image as a center of power at the regional and global levels.⁴

This means that under the guidance of the Justice and Development Party, Turkey has abandoned its previous and fairly unbalanced foreign policy course and its strong bias toward the West and the U.S.

- First, it has become aware of itself as a Muslim country and,
- second, it has claimed the role of a broker in the key geopolitical territory stretching from the Balkans and Palestine to Iran and Afghanistan: the country is leaning toward the Muslim world rather than toward the West.

Turkey's Foreign Ministry has been demonstrating much more independence, which has inevitably cooled Turkey's relations with the EU and America.

Disappointed by the lack of progress and the fairly slack talks on Turkey's EU membership, the country's leaders have chosen the following:

- (1) Strategic relations with Russia;
- (2) Revised relations with Iran and Syria;
- (3) Involvement in the conflicts with Israel;

³ See: A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik (Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu)*, Istanbul, 2001.

⁴ See: "Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbors," available at [www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa].

- (4) An active policy in the Black Sea-Caspian area;
- (5) Wider cooperation with most of the Soviet successor-states in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia;
- (6) After a ten-year “lull,” implementation of a plan to establish a so-called Turkic belt, which will allow Turkey to gain serious political and economic dividends in Eurasia despite its fifty-year role as an outpost of NATO.

It should be said that soft power also plays a certain role: secular Turkey is a Eurasian country in the full sense of the word, which invariably confirms its devotion to the Western institutions and maintains cultural, religious, and ethnic contacts (rooted in the distant past) with the peoples living between the EU and India. Historical experience and poly-mentality allow the Turks to negotiate barriers that the West is unable to surmount.

The somewhat cooler relations between the U.S. and Turkey do not speak of contradictions between the two countries; they show that Turkey is working on a pragmatic policy in tune with the world processes and adequate to its long-term forecasts of regional and global developments.

It turned out, however, that the doctrine could not be implemented because of the insurmountable difficulties, while Ankara’s hectic activities failed to bring the desired results.

The Arab Spring, for example, revealed that Turkey could not harmonize its own interests, which belong to different spheres.

The failed reconciliation with Armenia can be described as another fiasco of Davutoğlu’s foreign policy course.

At first glance, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia are still lingering on the periphery of Turkey’s foreign policy interests to be remembered when Ankara runs into disagreements with Washington and Brussels. On the other hand, bilateral relations with the South Caucasian and Central Asian countries are accompanied by Ankara’s obvious attempts to dominate in these regions.

So far, Turkey is not the main actor in the Southern Caucasus, while its claims contradict, to a certain extent, the strategic interests of Russia, Iran, and the United States there.

Russia’s and Turkey’s interests in the Southern Caucasus change frequently, which means that conflicts are not far away and that relations among the region’s states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) might also be endangered.

At the same time, Turkish interests there correspond to the interests of the United States and the EU. Brussels is ready to give Ankara a *carte blanche* to be actively involved in the region, establish and maintain bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, and create a more favorable economic climate in the region.

On the whole, the Turkey-EU-Southern Caucasus axis is not conflict-prone. The United States, which is pursuing its own strategic interests in the region, wants to control everything going on there to prevent “reanimation” of Russia’s position and keep Iran away from the Muslim areas of the Southern Caucasus.

This explains why the U.S. is opposed to Turkey’s strong and growing influence there and tries to control all attempts at integration.

Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku Geopolitical Axis

The axis that is taking shape before our eyes is based on the geopolitical interests shared by Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan engaged in joint energy and transportation projects and military-

political cooperation. Each of them concentrates on its own interests; on the whole, however, these interests correspond to the policy pursued by the U.S. and the EU in the region, which have already made ambitious energy and transportation projects possible.

The oil pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and gas pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) projects were designed with the active involvement of the United States; today it is actively lobbying the so-called Southern Gas Corridor project designed to bring Caspian gas to Europe and leave Russia out in the cold.

Speaking at the Caspian Oil & Gas 2013, Amos J Hochstein, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy Diplomacy, officially supported the project.⁵ In the past, Washington was also an active supporter of the Nabucco project, which proved to be forbiddingly expensive and, therefore, unrealizable.

The Nabucco-West gas pipeline, another pet project expected to bring gas from the Turkish-Bulgarian border to the borders of Austria, was also abandoned.

On 26 June, 2013, a consortium of companies supported the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline—TAP project which will bring Azeri gas to Europe.⁶

The axis formation is accompanied by tripartite summits as a way to coordinate the foreign policy moves and economic activities of the countries involved.

On 19 February, 2014, Ganja hosted a third meeting of the foreign ministers of the three countries (the first was held in 2012 in Trabzon; the second, in 2013 in Batumi), which confirmed that their determination to build a triple alliance of sorts or a “union of the countries on the banks of River Kura”⁷ remained unshakable.

On 6 May, 2014, the presidents of these countries took part in the 2014 Tbilisi Summit.⁸

It should be said that these countries coordinate their actions in international forums and organizations and harmonize their positions on regional conflicts. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey demonstrated a coordinated approach and voted together with the countries that supported Resolution A/68/L.39 on Territorial Integrity of Ukraine at the U.N. General Assembly.⁹

The economy is another important part of their strategic cooperation. The share of Turkic capital in the non-energy sectors of Georgia and Azerbaijan is rising. However, Turkey remains as determined as ever to become an energy hub, where the routes of Caspian energy resources meet, which will increase its geopolitical weight in the Southern Caucasus; it hopes to move the larger part of energy resources intended for several European states across its territory.¹⁰

The recent events in Ukraine rekindled an interest in bringing energy to Europe bypassing Russia, a target of American and EU sanctions.

The Caspian Forum Brussels 2014 discussed how the Southern Gas Corridor would be implemented and how natural gas from Azerbaijan would be brought to Europe by TAP in 2018.¹¹ Meanwhile, it remains unclear whether the pipeline will be profitable enough and whether there is enough gas in Azerbaijan to meet the fairly substantial European demands.

⁵ See: “Cumhurbaşkanı Aliyev ABD Dışişleri Bakanlığı Yetkilisini Kabul Etti,” available at [www.1news.com.tr/azerbaycan/siyaset/20130605102354059.html].

⁶ See: “Bay bay Nabucco!,” available at [hurariv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/printnews.aspx?DocID=23594472].

⁷ “Türkiye, Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan Kura’da Buluşacak,” available at [http://www.ardahanhaberleri.com/haber/3862/turkiye-azerbaycan-ve-gurcistan-kurada-bulusacak].

⁸ See: “Türkiye-Gürcistan-Azerbaycan Üçlü Zirvesi Başladı,” available at [www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/170/89419/turkiyegurcistan-azerbaycan-uclu-zirvesi-basladi.html].

⁹ See: “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling Upon States Not To Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region,” available at [www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/ga11493.doc.htm].

¹⁰ See: T.D. Adams, “Caspian Oil and Gas Development and the Black Sea Region: An Overview,” in: *Europe’s Black Sea Dimension*, CEPS, Brussels, 2002, pp. 47-52, 60-68.

¹¹ See: “Caspian Forum Brussels 2014,” available at [www.caspianforum.org/news/caspian_forum_brussels_2014_563.aspx].

The planned Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku (KATB) railway is another important project; in the future this route, which is expected to connect Turkey and Georgia by railway, will be linked to the railway network already functioning in Azerbaijan. If the Marmarai underwater railway tunnel under the Bosphorus is built, it will be connected in the east with the planned railway-sea route between Baku and Aktau in Kazakhstan and will go on to China. This will make KATB part of a railway route between Asia and Europe, shorter than the one used today.¹²

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are also interested; their presidents have pointed out that the Navoi-Turkmenbashi-Baku-Tbilisi-Kars transportation project will be even more important, since it will give the Central Asian countries access to international markets.

Seen from Ankara, the KATB is an important instrument to be used to promote its geopolitical and geo-economic interests and to stay connected to the Turkic states. The Kars-Gumri-Tbilisi road is already functioning in the Southern Caucasus, but so far it has been impossible to involve Armenia in the project: the Armenian-Turkish border remains closed because Ankara sides with Baku on the Karabakh issue.

The military component is an important part of relations among Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia. Turkey is one of the main weapon suppliers to Georgia and Azerbaijan; it also owns military facilities there. The three countries' military-technical cooperation is part of the region's ongoing militarization. Turkey, a NATO member, is not only leading Azerbaijan and Georgia toward the Alliance, but is also extending military assistance.

Joint military exercises of the three countries have become a regular feature of this cooperation: between 26 November and 3 December, 2012, special groups from the three countries conducted training exercises in Ankara. In April 2013, Defense Minister of Georgia Irakli Alasania announced at a conference that Turkey and Azerbaijan would join the Georgian-American military exercises planned for 2014.¹³

There is an opinion that very soon we will see a new military bloc in the Southern Caucasus that will unite Ankara, Tbilisi, and Baku—the reasons for this supposition are ample. There are talks, at the expert level, of setting up a single Azeri-Turkish army; Zahid Oruc, a member of the security and defense committee in the Azerbaijan parliament, who revealed these plans, said that the new formula “One nation, one army” is more preferable than the old one “One nation, two states.”¹⁴

Some think that the two countries are working on a military agreement with very specific mutual obligations in the event of aggression against one of them.¹⁵

The Trabzon Declaration registered the new relations among Ankara, Tbilisi, and Baku, the first ever official document signed by the three countries that can be described as strategic. It pays particular attention to territorial integrity and the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan and Georgia; it also touches upon resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, settlement of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia issues, the Eurasian Transport Corridor, new tripartite projects, completion of the KATB, etc.¹⁶

¹² See: “S tseliu stroitelstva zh/d Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi budet ob'iaвлен mezhdunarodny tender,” available at [www.regnum.ru/news/602097.html].

¹³ See: “Turtsia i Azerbaijan vozmozhno prisoediniatsia k sovmeštnym gruzino-amerikanskim voennym ucheniiam,” available at [mca.su/v-mire/blizhnij-vostok/turciya-blizhnij-vostok/turciya-i-azerbajdzhan-vozmozhno-prisoedinyatsya-k-sovmeštnym-gruzino-amerikanskim-voennym-ucheniyam/].

¹⁴ “‘Odna natsia, edinaia armia’: Baku i Ankara formiruiut edinuiu armiiu,” available at [www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1691679.html]; [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=623806141010105&id=558590324198354].

¹⁵ See: “NATO podtalkivaet Azerbaijan i Turtsiiu k zakliucheniiu voennogo soglashenia?,” available at [news.am/rus/news/202069.html].

¹⁶ See: “Trabzon Declaration,” Trabzon, 8 June, 2012, available at [http://www.mfa.gov.az, http://www.mfa.gov.tr, http://www.mfa.gov.ge].

The pace at which economic and military-political integration among Ankara, Baku, and Tbilisi is going and the frequent summits suggest that there is a trend toward a strategic alliance among Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

Turkish-Armenian Relations through the Prism of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Southern Caucasus

Normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations is a linchpin of Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy doctrine Zero Problems with Our Neighbors. Turkey was one of the first to recognize the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Armenia. In 1993, however, a U-turn in Ankara's foreign policy priorities ruptured diplomatic relations with Armenia and their common border was closed. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a stumbling block in its own right, revealed a vast number of unsettled problems. Today, border opening is associated with a Karabakh settlement according to the scenario written in Baku.

Today, relations between Ankara and Erevan are better described as a dilemma.

On the one hand, an open border would create a strong stimulus for their normalization and development. Armenia could acquire access to Turkish territory and the sea and further on to Europe, a great advantage for a landlocked country.

On the other hand, Turkey is ready to normalize its relations with Armenia on certain conditions.

Armenia is ready for unconditional normalization; Turkey is ready to open borders if Erevan abandons its attempts to achieve international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and accept a Karabakh settlement on Azerbaijan's terms.

It should be said that Turkey knows that the blockade of Armenia will not force Erevan to drop its efforts related to the genocide issue; indeed, while the borders remain closed, the attempts to gain international recognition of the Armenian Genocide will continue.

The Turkish leaders know that open borders and mutually advantageous economic relations will push the international recognition issue into the background. The Armenian political community, the public and, to a certain extent, the Armenian diaspora will retreat from their present intransigent positions when the shortest land route to Europe becomes accessible, when transborder trade improves the standard of living, when the state coffers fill with money earned by more active trade with Turkey and other countries, and when capital accumulation by big and medium local businesses becomes a reality.

An open border will strengthen Turkey's economic and political position in the Southern Caucasus and open new avenues toward Karabakh settlement. Armenia will become less dependent on the Russian Federation; the Russian military base in Gumri will lose its present importance (this has already happened to the Russian bases in Ajaria and Javakheti).

Open borders will confirm Turkey's European choice with corresponding political and economic dividends; its readiness to talk to its neighbors and settle disagreements will improve Turkey's image in the United States and Europe.

The above suggests a question: Why is Turkey not hastening to restore diplomatic relations with Armenia? The answer is rooted in its relationship with Azerbaijan. Indeed, economic relations between Turkey and Armenia established before the Karabakh settlement will reduce to naught everything Azerbaijan has been doing to keep Armenia isolated and will raise a wave of indignation in

Azerbaijan. Here is a telltale fact: as soon as the Zurich Protocols were signed the Turkish officials hastened to assure their partners in Baku that the protocols would not be ratified before the Karabakh issue was settled.

In this context, we should bear in mind that Turkey regards the Armenian factor as part of its relationship with the West; as the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide approaches, Ankara will probably rely on the entire range of its foreign policy instruments to alleviate the very probable international pressure.

On 24 April, 2014, Recep Erdoğan issued a statement in which he said that the events of 1915 were “inhumane” and “we wish that the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early twentieth century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren.” He also described the incidents of that time as “our shared pain.” Speaking on the same occasion, the Turkish Foreign Minister said that the current situation created common historical ground on which the two sides could discuss ways to establish a new future.

The Turkish leaders tried to improve their country’s international image or, at least, among their Western colleagues; they demonstrated their determination to soften the fairly firm international position on the recognition of the 1915 events as Armenian Genocide.

It seems that “Erdoğan’s surprising statement on the Armenian issue came just one day before 24 April, when the Armenians commemorate the events they describe as a genocide that took place under Ottoman rule. The statement was issued by the Prime Minister on 23 April in nine languages—Turkish, German, French, English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Western Armenian and Eastern Armenian—in a move to make sure that the statement was heard and understood by a wide audience.” I have written above that Turkey is exerting immense efforts to stem the process of recognition of these events as Armenian Genocide. According to Osman Bengur (an American expert with Turkish roots), “by some accounts, approximately 70 percent of the Turkish Embassy’s time in Washington is spent trying to persuade leading Americans to support the Turkish position on the Armenian question.”¹⁷

Turkey’s political move described above was supported in the West. The U.S. Department of State perceived it as evidence of better relations between the Turkish and Armenian peoples. What is more, some analysts think that “Erdoğan’s statement was cooked up in collaboration with the U.S. government.”¹⁸ Armenia, in turn, interpreted this address as another attempt to deny and conceal the fact of the Armenian Genocide.¹⁹

This means that relations between the two countries remain unregulated probably because the sides are not equally interested in their normalization. The chances are few in the short- or even mid-term perspective—we are pinning our hopes on the more distant future.

C o n c l u s i o n

The above can be summed up in the following way.

The Soviet Union’s disintegration opened up new horizons for Turkey in the Southern Caucasus, which transformed it into one of the key regional countries. Its efforts to achieve geopolitical domination there were largely prompted by the fact that both the U.S. and the EU regarded it as a force capable of bringing together the Turkic-speakers of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

¹⁷ O. Bengur, “Turkey’s Image and the Armenian Question,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 2009, p. 45.

¹⁸ “Erdoğan Pledges New Reforms Amid Mounting Western Criticism on Rights,” available at [<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-346809-erdogan-pledges-new-reforms-amid-mounting-western-criticism-on-rights.html>].

¹⁹ See: “Prezident Armenii otvetil Erdoganu,” available at [www.voskanapat.info/?p=7419].

This is explained by the West's desire to prevent possible reanimation of Russia's position in the Caucasus and Iran's stronger position in the Muslim areas. The scenario written in the West included the Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku axis based on their common economic and political interests. For obvious reasons, each of the countries concentrates on its own geopolitical interests, but, on the whole, they correspond to American and EU policy in the Southern Caucasus. This has already made possible wide-scale energy and transportation projects.

Turkey is striving to use its involvement in the Southern Caucasus to become an energy hub.

Turkey's foreign policy course within the Zero Problems with Our Neighbors doctrine ran into insurmountable complications. Its active foreign policy never brought the expected and desired results; the Arab Spring showed that Turkey could not harmonize its widespread and variegated interests. Ahmet Davutoğlu's new foreign policy course failed with respect to Armenian-Turkish reconciliation.

It should be said that being politically involved in the Southern Caucasus, Turkey has to take the interests of many players into account, all of them seeking their own advantages in the region.

Turkey is actively cooperating with the extra-regional power centers: supported by the United States, it is building a geopolitical Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku axis that is basically anti-Russian. At the same time, it is developing its relations with Russia, especially in the energy and trade spheres.
