

TURKEY AND SECURITY IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS: THE CAUCASUS STABILITY AND COOPERATION PLATFORM

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Introduction

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia tipped the balance of forces in the Southern Caucasus and made it harder to set up a regional security system.

The new challenges (occupation of Georgia's two regions and recognition of their independence) were set off by certain positive shifts (the "football diplomacy" between Turkey and

Armenia and the Zurich Protocols) which, however, did not carry enough weight to accelerate the peacekeeping process.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform Turkey laid on the table in the wake of the August war obviously had no future, although it clarified the problems to a certain extent and inspired the quest for new and more adequate decisions.

The Road toward the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform

Since the 1990s, Turkey, one of the key political actors in the Southern Caucasus, has offered a regional security model twice.

On 16 January, 2000, President Süleyman Demirel invited the regional countries to join the Caucasus Stability Pact, which envisaged Washington's active involvement; the project, however, was never realized.

Back in 1999, then President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze offered a similar project at the Istanbul OSCE Summit and was supported by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Robert Kocharian specified the idea in the 3 + 3 + 2 formula: three South Caucasian republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia); three neighbors (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) and two extraregional powers (the European Union and the United States). None of the leaders, however, were inspired enough by this relatively feasible idea to develop it further.

In 2000, the Center for European Policy Studies in Brussels came forward with its own Stability Pact for the Caucasus.¹ This largely useful document threatened, albeit indirectly, the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia.²

This means that the quest for a regional security model acceptable to both the regional and external actors failed.

The 2008 August war added urgency to the regional security issue and made the search for a way out even more complicated; Turkey alone braved the challenge while the war was still going on by putting forward the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.

On 11 August, 2008, Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to Moscow to discuss the project with President Medvedev; he then went to Baku and Tbilisi to hold consultations, during which proposals were made to form an alliance.

Under the second version of the same document, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey were expected to communicate in the Five or 3 + 2 formats. Later, the Turkish prime minister specified that the U.N. should be invited to join the talks.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform and the Local States

Baku and Erevan were quite positive about the Platform; Foreign Minister of Armenia Nalbandian said that his country was prepared to talk on a whole range of issues and was especially interested in a dialog on regional security and cooperation. He promised his country's presence at the negotiation table.³

Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan E. Mamedyarov hailed Turkey's initiative.

Tbilisi, however, preferred to stay away. It refused in principle to join a regional alliance which involved negotiations with Russia, which, by that time, had occupied 20 percent of its territory; it could not accept the absence of the EU and U.S. from the project, since this went totally against its interests.

¹ See: A Stability Pact for the Caucasus. A Consultative Document of the CEPS Task Force on the Caucasus.

² For example, the "common state" idea expected to settle the conflict with Abkhazia gave equal status to Georgia and Abkhazia within the common state in which Abkhazia had the right to establish relations with other countries on its own and in some cases enter into agreements with them. Under the document, Abkhazia also had the right to have its own armed forces and police force. This boiled down to a confederation which, if realized, endangered Georgia's territorial integrity.

³ See: "Ankara stremitsia umenshit svoiu vinu pered Moskvoy za vooruzhenie Tbilisi: ARFD," available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1050572.html>], 5 September, 2008.

When talking to Prime Minister Erdoğan in Tbilisi, President Saakashvili was very positive about Turkey's attempts to set up regional security mechanisms and asked the Turks to keep trying.⁴

During his meeting with the Georgian president, the prime minister of Turkey specified his country's position by saying that no matter how complicated the situation might look, it could be resolved by the concerted efforts of the regional countries rather than by outside interference. He said that as the only country which refused to join the initiative Georgia risked self-isolation.⁵

The Five Format left the European Union and the United States out in the cold; Iran, one of the regional players, was not invited either.⁶

The fact that Turkey excluded strong political actors with regional interests of their own and key international structures from its Platform speaks volumes and makes us wonder whether this initiative could bring peace and security to the Southern Caucasus.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform and the United States

Washington's response to Turkey's initiative was fairly reserved. According to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza, America was not informed. It was said that the White House believed it expedient to establish closer relations with allied Turkey in view of the two countries' common interests in and outside the Southern Caucasus.⁷

In an interview which appeared in *The Guardian* on 18 August, 2008, President of Turkey Abdullah Gül said: "The conflict in Georgia showed that the United States could no longer shape global politics on its own and should begin sharing power with other countries."⁸

Closer cooperation between America and Turkey on the regional security issue came to the fore much later, after the August war had become history. In the heat of the war, Ankara preferred to talk to Moscow and seek certain agreements with it.

Turkey's refusal to allow U.S. naval vessels carrying humanitarian aid to Georgia (Washington openly sided with Tbilisi) through the Straits during the Russian-Georgian war made the relations between the two countries even more strained. Ankara referred to the Montreux Convention⁹; President Gül was quoted as saying that Turkey, which belonged to the region, was responsible for peace and stability in the Black Sea.¹⁰

On 23 September, American ships entered the Black Sea, however the delay did nothing for the United States' image. The president of Turkey offered his personal comments some twelve months

⁴ See: "Erdoğan Backs Georgian Sovereignty, Caucasus Platform," *Today's Zaman*, 15 August, 2008.

⁵ See: *Ibidem*.

⁶ It should be said that Turkey's earlier Caucasus Stability Pact likewise kept Iran outside the dialog format. In both cases, Turkey excluded Iran from its regional security model.

⁷ See: "Amerikantsy ushchemleny nesoglasovannoy aktivnostiu Turtsii na Kavkaze i dialogom mezhdu Ankaroy i Moskvoy," available at [www.regnum./news/], 30 September, 2008.

⁸ "US Must Share Power in New World Order, Says Turkey's Controversial President," available at [www.guardian.co.uk/2008/aug/].

⁹ The Montreux Convention regulated the regime of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and limited the maximum permissible volume of vessels of the countries which remained outside the Convention and which did not belong to the Black Sea region to 45,000 tonnes. Both U.S. vessels exceeded the weight limit (see: "Montreux Convention under Spotlight," *Today's Zaman*, 23 August, 2008).

¹⁰ See: "Turkey Allows US Ships to Take Aid to Georgia," *Today's Zaman*, 20 September, 2008.

later when addressing the Center for Strategic Research in Ankara: the Georgian events, he said, should be treated as a warning about possible flare-ups of the frozen conflicts in the region.

He also argued that the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, which came into play during the Russian-Georgian war, had prevented a greater tragedy.¹¹

Some think that cooler relations between Turkey, on the one hand, and the EU and U.S., on the other, might push the former closer to Russia.

Zeyno Baran, a leading fellow at the Hudson Institute, wrote in September 2008 that when the NATO naval vessels approached the Straits, Turkey had to choose between Russia and the United States; at the height of the August war, Turkey and Russia initiated a five-sided Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. Where is Turkey going? Zeyno Baran wants to know.

Later developments showed that Turkey and Russia were drifting closer; in fact, Ankara's desire to be involved in the peace and stability dialog in the Southern Caucasus looks natural. It should be said, however, that geopolitical changes of this sort limit the local countries' freedom of foreign policy maneuver.

Relations between Turkey and the United States cooled after one of Congress' committees recognized the fact of Armenian genocide; Ankara recalled its ambassador, allegedly for consultations.

The interests of the former allies are no longer identical; anti-American sentiments are on the rise in Turkey. Their strategic partnership will survive the crisis for the simple reason that Turkey needs a strong ally, while the United States needs a partner it can rely on in the Middle East and the Southern Caucasus.

On 19 August, 2008, Prime Minister Erdoğan met the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Sweden, and Finland, OSCE Chairman-in-Office Alexander Stubb, and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to discuss the Caucasus Stability Pact.

Turkey was obviously seeking a wider dialog on regional security.

Left in the Cold, Iran Stirs into Action

The Armenian political elite shared the Iranian national elite's concern about the fact that the country had been left outside the Five Format designed to address the Caucasian problems. One of the top Armenian diplomats said that the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform had obviously been knocked together in haste, while on 4 September, 2008 Chairman of the NA Standing Committee on Foreign Relations Armen Rustamian, when speaking at a press conference, said that Iran's absence from this format was a time bomb which would destroy the security system.¹²

On 17 September, 2008, one of the Armenian newspapers carried a statement by Kamal Zareh, representative on political affairs of the Embassy of Iran in Armenia, in which he dismissed Turkey's initiative as hasty and half-baked and pointed out that a regional balance cannot be achieved without his country.¹³

¹¹ See: Prezident Turtsii: Vzryv v kavkazskom regione mozhet proizoyti v lyuboe vremia," 6 September, 2009, available at [www.ghn.ge].

¹² See: Vigen Akopian: "Voyna v Yuzhnoy Osetii i novye perspektivy armiano-turetskikh otnosheniy," available at [www.regnum.ru/], 6 September, 2008.

¹³ See: "Iran vyshel iz teni: bezopasnost na Kavkaze mezhdru Turtsiey i Iranom," available at [www.regnum.ru/news/], 17 September, 2008.

Left outside the Platform, Iran demonstrated much more activity on the international arena: Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki visited the capitals of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Germany to discuss what could be done to preserve stability and peace in the Southern Caucasus.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform and Russia

Russia was very positive about Prime Minister Erdoğan's initiative. On 7 October, 2008, Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov said in an interview with *Rossiiskaia gazeta*: "Turkey's idea to set up a common Security Platform in the Caucasus is a product of Turkish diplomacy; I think that the Turks have grasped the meaning of this unique moment, which fully justifies their presence in the region."¹⁴

The draft of the Platform reserved Russia and Turkey the role of guarantors of regional security; Ankara's inflated ambitions pushed Iran and the other extraregional actors out of the game.

The Russian-Georgian war and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence dealt the heaviest blow to the Platform, which rested on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. Moscow assumed a peremptory tone to announce that the Southern Caucasus with its two new states had changed beyond recognition. Moscow went even further to say that it was prepared to deal with four of them and that it had temporarily severed diplomatic relations with Georgia.¹⁵

Moscow has its own ideas about the draft Platform; it is trying to keep external powers outside the area of its strategic interest or at least trim their influence there. It blocked off the efforts of the international observer missions of the U.N. and OSCE in Georgia after the 2008 August war. Some think that Russia does not need any outside opinion about its activities in the self-proclaimed break-away republics and adjacent territories.

Russia, which has trampled on Georgia's sovereignty, can be described as the main threat to regional peace and security.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform Transformed: Iran Receives an Invitation

Turkey and Iran moved somewhat closer on certain issues about twelve months after the Platform had been put on the table.

Early in November 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Tehran where he said that Turkey and Iran are equally interested in Caucasian stability, which meant that all the regional countries should be involved in dealing with regional problems.¹⁶

¹⁴ "Sergey Lavrov rasskazal ob Armenii, Azerbaidzhane, Turtsii i SShA," available at [www.rg.ru], 7 October, 2008.

¹⁵ See: "Rossia ne zhelaet vmeshatelstva tretikh stran v protsessy na Kavkaze: mnenie," available at [www.regnum.ru/news], 24 October, 2008.

¹⁶ See: "Stanislav Tarasov: Turtsia vvodit Iran v 'kavkazskoe uravnenie'," available at [www.regnum.ru/news], 9 November, 2009.

Turkey had obviously moved away from its previous stand on Iran, which it treated as an unwelcome member of the alliance. On 2 November, 2009, the two countries signed an agreement on cooperation in energy resources. According to Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz, the newly signed document gave his country the opportunity to be involved in developing the largest Iranian oil field; the minister went on to say that the project might make Iran one of the main suppliers of Nabucco.

During his November 2009 visit to Tehran, the Turkish prime minister deemed it necessary to point out that Iran was invited to join the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. As a follow-up to the 8 December meeting between

Early in November 2009, Prime Erdoğan and President Obama, the White House announced that Turkey could move in as a mediator between the United States and Iran.

As a Platform member, Iran might add a fresh boost to the idea of regional stability, however its strained relations with the United States might interfere with its realization.

The Dialog that Fell Apart

Russia, which recognized “two new states” in the Caucasus, thus violated the Platform’s basic principle of territorial integrity of the South Caucasian states; the dialog on regional security degenerated into squabbles between the states involved (Georgia and Russia; Armenia and Turkey; Azerbaijan and Armenia).

Ankara made another attempt to sort out the cooperation and stability problems by putting forward a Caucasian Alliance project.

In an effort to settle its disagreements with Armenia, Turkey asked Switzerland to start the talks with Erevan on cooperation and opening the borders.

On 24 April, 2009, Turkey and Armenia signed a road map agreement.

On 10 October, 2009, they signed protocols which neither of them has ratified so far.

If achieved, a settlement between Turkey and Armenia will become an event of regional dimensions which will supply all the South Caucasian states with new foreign policy landmarks and improve Turkey’s image along with its chances of joining the EU.

Russia, which was very positive about the prospect of stabilized relations between Erevan and Ankara, deemed it necessary to point out that the issue belonged to their bilateral relations.

There is the other side of the coin: normalized relations between Turkey and Armenia might bring the latter closer to the West and NATO, which might cast doubts on Russia’s continued military presence in Armenia. The Kremlin obviously prefers to keep its strategic ally within its sphere of influence.

Washington believes that an agreement between Turkey and Armenia should be achieved without preliminary conditions and the sides called upon to move forward toward regional stability and security.

The dialog between Russia and Georgia has been going on in the Geneva Talks format, which concentrates on security. The previous two years have produced no results for the simple reason that Russia refuses to treat Georgia as a sovereign state.

The prospects for regional cooperation are dimmed by the new challenges.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Although it is interesting, Turkey’s Caucasian Alliance idea is not free from certain serious flaws:

- Turkey preferred to ignore the interests of the United States as the world's strongest power;
- the European Union, which shouldered the peacekeeping mission during the August war of 2008, was left outside the project even though its observers are still stationed in the territories adjacent to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region;
- the Five format did not presuppose the active involvement of the OSCE and U.N. Later the U.N. was invited to join the talks (on an initiative by the Turkish prime minister); its decisions, however, produced no effect on what was going on in the region;
- Russia's invasion of Georgia cast doubt on the local states' territorial integrity as the basic principle of regional cooperation.

The world community is closely following the developments in the Southern Caucasus because they greatly affect the global security system. This means that when looking for new ways and means of regional stabilization, we should take into account the strong and the weak sides of Turkey's Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.
