

New Security Configuration in the Caucasus

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Normalisation between Turkey and Armenia and an improving outlook for a settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan will remove the last roadblocks to regional security in the Caucasus

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The U.S. hopes that Turkey opening its doors to Armenia would help wean it away from Russia. Today, Armenia is Russia's only strategic ally in the Caucasus. It is a member of the Russia-led defence pact of six former Soviet states and hosts a major Russian military base on its territory.

-Russia further consolidated its position as the dominant player in the Caucasus, signing last month defence pacts with Georgia's breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, whose independence it recognised after routing Georgia in a five-day war in August 2008.

The agreements allow Russia to station 1,700 troops in each region for the next 49 years, with the option of extension for five-year periods thereafter. Nevertheless, Moscow seems ready to cede some of its influence to Ankara in order to achieve a bigger strategic objective: create a regional security mechanism that would exclude outside players, above all the U.S. and the NATO, whose poking only creates trouble, as it happened last year when the U.S.-armed and trained Georgian military attacked South Ossetia.

The milestone accords Turkey and Armenia sealed this month to normalise their relations after a century of hostility have dramatically changed the geopolitical configuration in the Caucasus. They have opened the way to a new security arrangement in the region on the basis of the emerging Russia-Turkey alliance.

At an October 10 ceremony in Zurich, the Foreign Ministers signed protocols setting a timetable to establish diplomatic ties and reopen the border, which has been closed for 15 years. The importance of the event was underlined by the presence of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and the European Union's Javier Solana.

The accords, subject to ratification, however, face formidable opposition in both Turkey and Armenia. The Turks are angry at Armenia continuing "occupation" of 14 per cent of the territory of Turkey's ethnic ally Azerbaijan in the predominantly Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, which split from Azerbaijan in the wake of an inter-ethnic conflict in the early 1990s. In 1993, Turkey sealed the border and severed all contacts with Armenia over

the conflict. For their part, the Armenians are angry over Turkey's denial of the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians from 1915 to 1919.

Bad feelings on both sides may slow down the normalisation process, but will hardly derail it as Turkey and Armenia have vital stakes in ending their historic enmity. Turkey stands to gain influence in the Caucasus and it will smoothen its path to membership in the European Union. Landlocked Armenia, blockaded by Turkey, on one side, and Azerbaijan, on the other, will gain through trade links with Turkey, a large economy closely tied to the EU. It would also become a transit trade route from Central Asia to Turkey and then to Europe.

Reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia is likely to facilitate the settlement of the territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The presence of the top diplomats from the U.S., Russia and France — the co-chairs to the OSCE Minsk Group, which mediates in talks on Nagorno-Karabakh — at the signing ceremony was quite symbolic in this regard.

Both Russia and the U.S. are interested in the Turkey-Armenia settlement. Russian business, which effectively controls the economy of Armenia, will benefit from the opening of the Turkish border with Armenia, as Russia is also the biggest trading partner of Turkey. In another gain for Russia, the role of its foe Georgia as the main transit route for Armenian trade will greatly diminish once Turkey opens up its border.

Russia has already reaped the first benefits on the energy front. Within days of the Turkey-Armenian agreement, its gas monopoly Gazprom signed a contract with Azerbaijan's state energy company SOCAR on Azerbaijani gas supply to Russia. The deal came as Baku denounced the Turkey-Armenian pact as running "completely against the national interests of Azerbaijan," because it was concluded without a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. It is for the first time that Azerbaijan will sell its gas to Russia, which could undermine the West's plan to build the Nabucco pipeline to ship Caspian and Central Asian gas to Europe bypassing Russia.

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For U.S. President Barack Obama, the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement offers a way out of a tight spot he put himself in during the presidential campaign when he promised support to a proposed Congress resolution denouncing the slaughter of Armenians during World War I as "genocide." This would have damaged U.S. relations with Turkey, which is of strategic importance to America as the only NATO country bordering the Caucasus.

Russia has its own game plan for the region. Last year, Moscow readily embraced Ankara's proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.

The CSCP, based on Turkey's concept of "zero problems with neighbours" policy, is promoted by Ankara as a mechanism for political dialogue, stability and crisis management in a region covering Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia.

For Turkey, the plan is an instrument to win a bigger foothold in the Russian backyard. Russia further consolidated its position as the dominant player in the Caucasus, signing last month defence pacts with Georgia's breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia,

whose independence it recognised after routing Georgia in a five-day war in August 2008.

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Even though Turkey is a NATO member, Moscow has appreciated Ankara's independent foreign policy in recent years that runs counter to U.S. interests on a range of regional issues.

Ankara would not let the U.S. use its territory for the war in Iraq and refused to join the West's Russia-bashing over the war in South Ossetia.

Turkey's ambitions of a regional superpower clash with the U.S.' aggressive push in the Caucasus. Turkey does not want the Black Sea to become a NATO lake and has resisted U.S. pressure to renegotiate the 1936 Montreux Convention, which restricts the passage of non-Black Sea nations' warships through the Bosphorus Straits.

During the Russian-Georgian conflict, Turkey invoked the Montreux Convention to block two big U.S. warships from sailing into the Black Sea on the pretext of delivering humanitarian aid to Georgia. While officially Turkey continues to support Georgia's territorial integrity, it has quietly moved to develop contacts with Abkhazia, with a senior Turkish diplomat visiting the regional capital Sukhumi last month.

When Turkish President Abdullah Gul paid a state visit to Moscow earlier this year, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made a straightforward proposal to set up a Russian-Turkish axis. "The August crisis showed that we can deal with problems in the region by ourselves, without the involvement of outside powers," Mr. Medvedev told a joint press conference. The Turkish leader effectively agreed, pointing to "substantially close or identical positions" the two countries took on "an absolute majority" of international issues.

In a joint declaration adopted at the summit, Russia and Turkey expressed support for Turkey's CSCP initiative, noted the "identity of view" on security and stability in the Black Sea region and reaffirmed their commitment to the Montreux Convention.

There is no denying that Russia and Turkey are historical rivals in the Caucasus, having fought 11 wars lasting 44 years in the past. They are still competing for influence in the region, but shared interests make them allies too. Russia meets 80 per cent of Turkey's natural gas needs through the Blue Stream pipe laid on the seabed across the Black Sea. Turkey has backed the Russian proposal to build a Blue Stream-2 pipeline, which, together with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, would make Turkey a major energy transit hub for Europe and Israel.

A distinct cooling in Turkey's relations with the U.S. over Iraq and the Kurdish problem, and with Europe over its granting EU membership to Cyprus and refusal to admit Turkey has further pushed Ankara towards Moscow.

Normalisation between Turkey and Armenia and an improving outlook for a settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan will remove the last roadblocks to a regional security set-

up on the basis of the Turkish CSPP proposal.

Moscow is already looking to extend its cooperation with Turkey on regional security beyond the Caucasus. On a visit to Istanbul last year, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointedly emphasised that Russia and Turkey shared similar views on “what needs to be done for a conclusive settlement in Iraq” and on “the necessity of peaceful political resolution of the situation regarding the Iranian nuclear programme.”

Chances of the new regional security configuration in the Caucasus becoming a reality will greatly depend on whether the U.S. goes along or tries to torpedo the project by encouraging its allies, Georgia and Azerbaijan, to reject the initiative.

In joint Russian-U.S. efforts to promote normalisation between Turkey and Armenia there are grounds for optimism. Mr. Medvedev hailed it as a “good example of our [Russian-American] coordination in international affairs.” The very possibility of the ongoing reset in relations between Russia and the U.S. being projected to the Caucasus will enable Moscow to play on Turkey’s fears of being left in the cold and help get the best deal from both.

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