

Turkish-Armenian Normalization and “Great Power Politics”

By Richard Giragosian¹

Although the effort to “normalize” relations between Armenia and Turkey has emerged as the most significant development in the Caucasus in the past year, Turkey’s engagement of Armenia represents only one element of a much larger and even more ambitious Turkish agenda. In fact, Turkey is now pursuing a new policy of deepening its ties to not only the countries of the Caucasus, but also including the countries of Central Asia. From this perspective, Turkey’s Stability Platform and policy of “zero problems” with its neighbors, including its engagement of Armenia, has assumed a much deeper and broader significance.

For example, the April 2009 visit to Armenia by Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan demonstrates Turkey’s leading role on two levels: within the region, as Babacan was dispatched to Yerevan to participate in a Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) ministerial meeting, and bilaterally, through the pursuit of a new “normalization” of relations with Armenia, reflected in Babacan’s bilateral talks with Armenian, Russian and Azerbaijani officials.

The Different Variables of the Equation

As the latest element of the process of Turkish engagement, the Babacan visit to Armenia also reveals the complex and sometimes confusing “equation” of Turkish-Armenian normalization. More specifically, the equation involves a wide set of variables, each of which reflects different and often competing interests, as well as posing various obstacles to the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations.

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The differing variables of the Turkish-Armenian equation include not only the regional actors, such as Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan and even Georgia, but also the United States. In this way, the current equation goes well beyond the interests of the two main interlocutors, Turkey and Armenia, but also encompasses the full set of competing powers and interests, as well as a pivotal non-state actor, the Armenian Diaspora itself.

Russian Support, Iranian Apprehension

Obviously, as the initial Armenian invitation to Turkish President Abdullah Gul to come to Armenia was extended during Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian's visit to Moscow, Russia has played a leading role in the early stages of the process.

More specifically, Russian policy has long been opposed to any significant improvement in relations between Armenia and Turkey and the closed border was seen as a helpful way to maintaining Russian dominance over Armenia, as demonstrated by the continued presence of a Russian military base and Russian border guards policing Armenia's borders, as well as its economic dominance over the Armenian economy. But Russian policy shifted dramatically in the wake of the August crisis, with a possible Armenian-Turkish rapprochement only serving to bolster the Russian strategy to more completely isolate, marginalize and surround Georgia. Nevertheless, Russia will only remain supportive as long as the future direction of Armenian-Turkish relations remains under its control.

There are also added benefits for Russia from the issue, however, such as the possible sale of electricity to eastern Turkey from Russian-owned energy network in Armenia. There was also a diplomatic coup by Moscow seizing the issue from the Americans, as the Armenian president publicly invited his Turkish counterpart to Armenia while on an official visit to Moscow and coordinate the opening closely with Russian officials.

A second important regional actor, Iran, sees things differently, however. For Iran, its exclusion from Turkey's so-called Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, is a threat to its aspirations to assume a greater regional role and only enhances its traditional rival, Turkey. Further, Iran sees Turkish strategy as seeking to contain and constrain Iranian interests through Turkish plans for security and regional stability, and for energy export routes.

Azerbaijani Betrayal, Georgian Isolation

Unlike either Russia or Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia share a common sense of outrage at recent developments, as Baku feels betrayed and Tbilisi senses further isolation from Turkey's engagement of Armenia. For Azerbaijan, Turkey's recent moves are especially troubling, and

Baku is threatened by any improvement in Turkish-Armenian relations. Without progress over the region's last remaining "frozen conflict", Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan sees any Turkish move to open its border with Armenia as an undeserved reward.

In fact, the likelihood of normalized relations also spurred Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to borrow a traditionally Russian tactic, threatening to cut off supplies of natural gas to Turkey. Although Aliyev, who inherited power directly from his father, former Soviet KGB official Geidar Aliyev, and was recently freed from the constraints of constitutional term limits after a dubious national referendum, seems assured of domestic support for his stance, his position is much weaker than it seems. This has also raised new concerns that Azerbaijan may decide to not export its gas through Turkey, but may turn to Russia instead.

But there is an interesting weakness in Azerbaijani threats, with the hollow nature of Azerbaijan threats over Turkey's diplomatic engagement of Armenia driven by three considerations. First, Azerbaijan has nowhere else to go. Despite the end of the concept of a joint Turkish-Azerbaijani axis under the slogan of "one nation, two states," Baku needs Ankara much more than Turkey needs Azerbaijan, especially in the face of Russia's consolidation of power and influence in the region after last August's war in Georgia.

Second, no matter how unhappy Azerbaijani leaders may be with the Turkish move to embrace Armenia, they do realize that Turkish officials have become frustrated with their limited options in the region, as Turkish foreign policy has become virtually hostage to Azerbaijan after years of pursuing a failed policy of linking its approach toward Armenia with the stalemated Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Interestingly, this may strengthen Turkey's regional leverage over the longer term, however, as Turkey may well enhance its leverage in the region.

The third factor tending to marginalize Azerbaijani opposition is the new regional landscape in the wake of the Georgian war. Azerbaijan is no longer able to withstand the tide of regional change, as the course of Turkish-Armenian normalization has finally become inevitable, with even Russia offering its support.

Similarly, Georgia is increasingly concerned by the effects of an open border between Turkey and Armenia, which it sees as only deepening its isolation and increasing its marginalization after its defeat by Russia in the August 2008 war. Moreover, Georgia has lost its role as a transit state for regional energy and is worried over the improvement in Turkish-Russian relations.

Coming to the Crossroads

Nearly eight months after a brief but deadly war in Georgia that reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, the region is now set for a second, equally powerful transformation, as Armenia and Turkey are on the threshold of announcing a historic agreement on normalizing relations and opening borders.

For over fifteen years, the closed border between these two neighbors has stood as one of the world's last "Berlin's Wall," with Turkey maintaining a stubborn blockade and trade embargo of landlocked Armenia, imposed in 1993 after Armenia's military victory over its other neighbor, Azerbaijan, during the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

But after the historic visit to Armenia by Turkish President Abdullah Gul in September 2008, marking the first-ever visit to Armenia by a Turkish head of state, both sides now seemed poised to open their border, establish diplomatic relations and form some sort of "bilateral commission" tasked with resolving all outstanding issues, even including the contentious Armenian genocide. Although the agreement follows months of cautiously secret diplomatic negotiations hosted by the Swiss, this period may pose one of the most difficult tests for Turkey.

For Turkey, the challenge of normalizing relations with Armenia stems from the reaction of its long-time ally and fellow Turkic state Azerbaijan. From this larger perspective, Turkey now views the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a central factor to regional stability. But there is a very important difference in Turkey's strategic view of Karabakh. Specifically, Turkey no longer seeks to merely support Azerbaijan. In fact, the new Turkish engagement of Armenia, ranging from the high-profile visit to Yerevan by the Turkish president to the recent meetings in Yerevan, actually represents a significant shift in Turkish policy away from its traditional close support for Azerbaijan.

Thus, if both sides can survive these immediate challenges, it seems likely that both Turkey and Armenia have a real chance to surmount their differences. Yet such a bold move also requires a sense of political will and innovation capable of solving the difficult equation of so many competing actors and conflicting interests. One can only hope for a demonstration of such statesmanship by both Turkey and Armenia, otherwise, these two countries are in danger of remaining hostage to the past while the future passes them both by.