

COMMENTARY

Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus

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The outbreak of war between Georgia and Russia, following the ill-advised Georgian attempt to wrest control of the breakaway province of South Ossetia on August 7, posed an immediate challenge to Turkish interests. The conflict introduced instability and dangerous unpredictability immediately beyond Turkey's northeastern border after a period of relative calm in the Caucasus. It also placed Turkey in a difficult diplomatic position not only between two neighboring countries with which it has been cultivating close relations and cooperation, especially on energy, but also between the United States and Russia.

Georgia has assumed particular importance to Turkey as the middle leg of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline carrying Azeri oil to markets through the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline bringing Azeri gas to Turkey. However, after centuries of conflict and confrontation, Turkey-Russia relations have also witnessed a remarkable improvement, and Russia now supplies more than 60 percent of Turkish gas via Thrace and the Bluestream pipeline under the Black Sea.

After reportedly attempting to contact Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili on August 8 to express support. However, three days later, as Russian forces were pushing deeper into Georgia and Saakashvili was pleading for immediate help against Moscow, Erdogan unveiled a Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Pact that included the two combatants as well as Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey.

Significantly, Erdogan first took his plan to Moscow on August 13 where he met Russian president Dimitri Medvedev and Putin, who were predictably receptive to the idea, before going on to Tbilisi to meet the beleaguered Saakashvili, whose response to the idea of participation in a new cooperative forum with a country occupying portions of his country was understandably less enthusiastic. The plan was then conveyed by Erdogan to Azeri president Ilham Aliyev in Baku on August 20 and by Turkish president Abdullah Gul to Armenian president Serge Sargsyan during his groundbreaking visit to Yerevan on September 6.

Although the fighting in Georgia ended, the recognition by Russia of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia ensures the continuation of the Georgian-Russian confrontation. Azerbaijan and Armenia remain locked in a seemingly endless dispute over Nagorno Karabakh. It is therefore unlikely that the proposed pact will come into being in the near future. Consequently, the Turkish government's willingness to push ahead with this proposal as its primary response to the Caucasus crisis needs to be understood with reference to its broader policy of striving for "zero problems" with its neighbors as well as its demonstrated enthusiasm for playing the role of a mediator or facilitator in the solutions of problems in the regions surrounding Turkey.

These goals were also displayed during the prolonged effort to encourage Israel and Syria to proceed on a peace settlement, most recently during a visit by Erdogan to Damascus on September 4 where Syrian president Bashar Assad was reported to have given Erdogan yet another proposal to convey to Israel. At the same time, the Turkish government has been trying to help in reducing tensions between the United States and Iran, whose controversial president Mahmud Ahmedinejad visited Turkey on August 14 to 15.

While there have been periodic statements by Turkish leaders and officials that their diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East were coordinated with the United States, as part of what Ahmet Davutoglu, the leading foreign policy adviser to

Erdogan, calls “rhythmic diplomacy,” it is noteworthy that the Bush administration has shown a distinct reluctance to provide open support for these efforts. Nevertheless, Erdogan remained convinced that despite its skepticism about the likelihood of positive results, the United States would ultimately recognize the benefits of his approach.

Growing tensions in U.S.-Russia relations engendered by the war in Georgia seem likely to test the limits of Washington’s tolerance of Erdogan’s brand of active regional diplomacy. On August 19, a senior U.S. official focusing on the Caucasus crisis, Matthew Bryza, hinted at the divergence between the two countries by publicly expressing his “surprise” over Ankara’s Caucasus proposal.

After an initial hesitation at the beginning of hostilities, the Bush administration has adopted a policy based on buttressing Georgia through the provision of diplomatic and economic assistance, mobilizing its allies, and, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice put it somewhat undiplomatically, “punishing” Russia. A critical component of this strategy involved Turkey directly as the planned dispatch of U.S. Navy vessels to deliver supplies to Georgia required passage through the Turkish Straits.

On August 14 the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General James Cartwright, identified the two ships that would be sent as the *Comfort* and *Mercy*. As the tonnage of the ships exceeded the limits of the 1936 Montreux Convention governing passage through the straits, the United States may have expected Turkey to show flexibility in a gesture of allied solidarity. However, when Turkey chose to demand strict adherence to the convention, smaller U.S. vessels were sent through the straits.

After a pointed reminder from a Russian admiral that the U.S. ships would have to leave the Black Sea after 21 days in accordance with the convention, the Turkish Foreign Ministry proceeded to confirm that Turkey would insist on the application of the relevant provision and notify the embassy of the country concerned in the event of a transgression. The positive signals sent to Moscow were then underlined by an astonishing gesture on the part of a Turkish Navy commander who hosted his Russian counterpart on a Turkish frigate in the Black Sea on September 1.

Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan had joined his NATO colleagues at an emergency meeting on August 19, convened at the request of the United States to formulate a response to the Russian military action, where it was agreed, as the NATO secretary-general announced, that there could not be “business as usual” with Russia. However, Erdogan made it clear on September 2 that Turkey would not be a willing participant in a policy of confrontation with its important neighbor. In comments published in *Milliyet*, Erdogan said: “It would not be right for Turkey to be pushed toward any side. Certain circles want to push Turkey into a corner either with the United States or Russia after the Georgian incident. One of the sides is our closest ally, the United States. The other side is Russia, with which we have an important trade volume. We would act in line with what Turkey’s national interests require.”

Erdogan’s stance seems to have popular support in Turkey. While there is no particular affection for Russia or its leaders, there is also little sympathy for Georgia or its impetuous president. At the same time, as opinion polls confirm, Turks have developed a strong aversion to the policies and methods of the Bush administration and are therefore cool to the idea of cooperation with Washington against Moscow. The nuanced approach also has the backing of the influential Turkish General Staff, which has been carefully cultivating its own links with the Russian military parallel to its traditionally close ties to the U.S. military establishment.

Turkish national interests apparently dictate a continuing dialogue with Moscow even as Washington is trying to isolate it. On September 2, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Istanbul for talks with his Turkish counterpart. After promising a resolution of the costly delays in the processing of Turkish goods through Russian customs, Lavrov publicly acknowledged the favorable thrust of Turkish diplomacy by expressing “appreciation for Turkey’s efforts in the Caucasus.” It is noteworthy that while Lavrov was enjoying Turkish hospitality, Vice President Dick Cheney was on a trip to Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine to underline the Bush administration’s determination to confront Russian policy in the Caucasus. Cheney’s itinerary did not include Washington’s closest ally in the region, and the task of maintaining contact with Turkey was delegated to William Burns, undersecretary of state for political affairs, who was received by Erdogan on September 5.

In view of the stated seriousness of the Bush administration’s new policy toward Russia and the Turkish government’s demonstrated desire to avoid a deterioration of its relationship with its northern neighbor, it is difficult to escape the

conclusion that the Caucasus crisis is once again heightening sensitivities in U.S.-Turkey relations. To be sure, both sides remain committed to the alliance and have endeavored to repair the breaches caused by Turkey's unwillingness to support military action by the United States against Iraq in 2003 and the U.S. delay in backing a Turkish military response against Kurdish terrorism emanating from northern Iraq. However, the shared interests that bound them so closely in their Cold War alliance against the Soviet Union are not as strong as they were, as Ankara's pursuit of its own interests with Moscow confirms.

As the Bush administration is on its way out, it will be the next president who will have to determine how to maintain the alliance with Turkey as well as future relations with Russia. Another important related task will be to examine the viability of the East-West energy corridor, which is the product of U.S.-Turkish cooperation, in the new geopolitical environment. As part of this review, the next administration will have to take into account the north-south axis linking Russia and Turkey that is helping to shape international relations and energy politics in the Caucasus and beyond.

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