

TURKEY'S POLICIES IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS AND REGIONAL SECURITY MECHANISMS

(TÜRKİYE'NİN GÜNEY KAFKASYA'DAKİ POLİTİAKLARI VE BÖLGESEL GÜVENLİK MEKANİZMALARI)

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Abstract: *The disintegration of the USSR at first seemed to offer a vast area for the growth of Turkey's influence not only in the Caucasia region, but also in Central Asia. Turkey enthusiastically welcomed the three newly independent countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. While Turkey was able to forge a wide ranging level of cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia, it has been unsuccessful with regards to Armenia. The author contends that establishing ties with Armenia in the same vein as with Azerbaijan and Georgia, and also the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will have far-reaching implications for the Caucasia region as a whole. Continuing tensions within Turkey and tensions in the wider region present both domestic and foreign policy challenges for the country, and provide impediments to its aim to become a reliable energy transit route for the whole region.*

Keywords: *Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Caucasia, foreign policy*

Öz: *SSCB'nin dağılması ilk başlarda Türkiye için sadece Kafkasya'da değil, aynı zamanda Orta Asya'daki nüfuzunu genişletmesi için çok büyük bir alan ortaya çıkarıyor gibi gözüküyordu. Türkiye üç yeni bağımsız ülke olan Azerbaycan, Ermenistan ve Gürcistan'ı hevesle karşılamıştı. Türkiye Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan ile geniş çaplı bir işbirliği oluşturmayı başarmış olsa da, Ermenistan'la bu konuda başarısız olmuştur. Yazara göre aynen Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan ile yapıldığı gibi Ermenistan'la da ilişkilerin kurulması ve ayrıca Dağlık Karabağ sorununun çözülmesi Kafkasya bölgesinin tamamı için geniş kapsamlı sonuçları olacaktır. Hem Türkiye içerisinde, hem de geniş bölgedeki gerginlikler, Türkiye için hem iç hem de dış politika açısından zorluklar ortaya çıkarmakta ve Türkiye'nin tüm bölge için güvenilir bir enerji aktarma rotası olması hedefi önünde engel teşkil etmektedir.*

Anahtar kelimeler: *Türkiye, Ermenistan, Azerbaycan, Gürcistan, Kafkasya, dış politika*

The Southern Caucasus remains to be one of the most explosive regions across the post-Soviet territory. The current developments have taken place there against the background of continuous violence and armed clashes on the line of contact of both parties in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the entire stretch of the Armenian-Azerbaijani frontier; military training and field firing exercises; high level of military spending in the national budgets; close and versatile military and political as well as defense technology cooperation of the regional states with major external players.

Modern Turkey, being a pivot state for the US, seeks to revise the existing regional order, and it has an impressive potential in this respect, *inter alia*, within the “soft power” format. Turkey’s interests comprise the areas that used to be the exclusive domain of the great nations. In 2009-2010, the Republic of Turkey was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and it has been also proactively engaged in the activities within the framework of the European, Middle East, Balkan, emerging Black Sea, and Caspian “segments” of the increasingly complicated international relations. Also, it has positioned itself as an initiator of the Supranational Integration Association of the Turkic Speaking States,¹ which resonates perfectly well with the interests of the post-Soviet states in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia.

The strategic importance of the Caucasian region for Turkey can be explained by a combination of political, economic (energy security considerations, in particular), cultural, historical, and ethnical factors. Over the recent years, the Caucasian vector in the Turkish foreign policy has been overshadowed by Turkey’s active involvement in the Middle East process, especially in connection with the “Syrian issue”. However, the Caucasian vector has been traditionally accorded a primary status on Ankara’s political and diplomatic agenda, this has been vividly illustrated by the activities of governmental agencies, and also by multiple non-governmental funds and organizations, who declared their commitment to science, education, and humanitarian goals. Despite the apparent problems over the implementation of the Zero Problems with Neighbors Foreign Strategy, it has been a prominent guideline for the Justice and Development Party.

The declaration of independence by Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in 1991 was initially met with a lot of enthusiasm in Turkey and the prevailing expectation was that it would be followed by a rapid rapprochement and very close interaction. Turkey was the first to recognize the new states in the Caucasus, it established diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia with

1 V.A. Avatkov, “Foreign Policy Line of the Republic of Turkey in Relation to Transcaucasian Countries within the Context of Turkey’s Foreign Policy Ideology”, *Annual Publication of the Institute of International Studies*, GIMO (U), No. 2 (8), 2014, pp. 13-14.

no delay, offered humanitarian assistance through the delivery of foodstuffs and first necessity goods, forged trading contacts with them within a limited timeframe, being guided by protectionist goals, among other things. The Turkish business companies, who rushed to enter the new markets, were given a lot of support.² The idea of Turkic globalism was positively received among the Turkish elite, it also gave an extra impetus to the nationalistic sentiments, however, the Pan-Turkism doctrine has not been adopted as an official policy in Turkey. According to British researcher Gareth Winrow, “the sudden repeated discovery of almost forgotten peoples of the Turkic origin led to the inflated hopes and unrealistic expectations on behalf of certain Turkish officials. Ankara’s enthusiasm for its more active contacts with Transcaucasia... was to some extent sustained by the authorities of Western countries, who were apprehensive of a possibility for the Iranian influence to grow in the region”.³

Thus, the first years after the disintegration of the USSR were marked by the striving of the Turkish authorities to pursue a dynamic comprehensive policy in the Caucasus, which was viewed within the context of the geopolitical significance of this region for Turkey, and also as a basic region for a subsequent penetration into Central Asia. According to a well-known Turkish analyst Mitat Çelikpala, Associate Professor at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, at that period, for the first time throughout the newest history of the Republic of Turkey, committed to pursuing its non-interference policies, the country got a chance to expand its own zone of influence. The disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of new Turkic-Muslim republics opened new vistas for Turkey to play a critical role in the Caucasus and in Central Asia.⁴

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2 Ye. Urazova, “Turkey’s Interests and Stance in the Post-Soviet States in Central Asia and Southern Caucasus”, *MGUPublishers*, Globalistics as an Area of Science Research and Educational Discipline, Moscow, 2014, pp. 270-271.

3 Citation according to: S.A. Semedov, “Basic Aspects of Turkey’s Contemporary Policy in the Caucasus”, *Moscow University Newsletter*, Series 18: Social and Political Sciences, No. 2, 2008, pp. 41-42.

4 M. Celikpala, “From a Failed State to a Weak One? Georgia and Turkish-Georgian Relations”, *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, vol. 36, 2005.

A certain slump in the Turkish activities at the turn of the century related, inter alia, to the internal economic problems, was followed by a new wave of political, diplomatic, economic, and cultural expansion, after the Justice and Development Party headed by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power. However, although the Russian-Turkish trade and economic contacts experienced a plentiful growth during that period, the Turkish foreign policy on the post-Soviet territory could hardly be analyzed with no regard to the country's participation in the NATO military and political alliance or its close interaction with the US and the EU.

Euro-Atlantic Integration of Turkey as a Factor of Its Regional Policy

Initially, the foreign policy pursued by Ankara on the post-Soviet territory envisaged taking into account the US interests on a high-priority basis. Therefore, the Turkish-US Commission noted at its December, 1993, meeting that there were favorable opportunities for cooperation in the big-scale projects developed in the Middle East and Central Asia. The US Defense Ministry and the CIA suggested making large investment in the gas pipeline project in Central Asia. At the meeting of the Turkish-US Business Council held in late October, 1993, then Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin made a proposal to set up a center for economic relations to be forged with countries of various regions. He stressed that there was a huge potential for joint investment to be made by the two countries in Central Asia etc.⁵

The US attitude towards Turkey's penetration into the Caucasus is multi-faceted. On the one hand, Washington did not apply any efforts to help facilitate the Turkish expansion along the above direction, however, especially in the first half of the 1990s, there were ample possibilities for that. According to several experts, the US was aware of the limited capabilities of its partner - Turkey. Some problems that might be encountered by Turkey, whose investment and technological resources did not meet its political ambitions regarding the huge Eurasian region, had been also predicted. In addition to that, many experts believed that the US had not taken any specially targeted steps to curb Turkey's expansion into Eurasia. This viewpoint is thoroughly substantiated and justifiable, provided that non-action can be equated with politics. Nevertheless, for instance, if the US identified its priorities and interests in the energy sector, then Turkey would normally become a key partner. Thus, the Ankara Declaration of 29 October, 1998, was signed by the Presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan as well as the Prime

5 N. Kireyev (exec. ed.), "Turkey Between Europe and Asia. Results of Europeanization at the Turn of the 20th Century", *IVRANKraft*, 2001.

Minister of Turkey and US Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson in support of the efforts of the above countries dedicated to the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline that regulated the transportation of the Caspian hydrocarbons to the European markets along this route.⁶ At the same time, whenever there was only Turkey's interest in place, the US chose to ignore it.⁷ In all probability, since the early 2000s, the Turkish-US relationship have been characterized by certain changes, however, these changes have not been fully complete.⁸ The question of how far the architects of Turkey's new foreign policy course, sometimes tentatively called "Neo-Ottomanism", are prepared to go in conjunction with their opposition to such states, as the US and Israel, remains open. Turkey's strong connection to the NATO, the availability of US military bases on its territory, tactical nuclear weapons, and some elements of the global missile defense system being developed now, imply that there would be no news making the headlines in this respect, at least, in the foreseeable perspective. The internal and external policies of modern Turkey have been shaped under the influence of a whole array of factors, which have impacted Turkey's relations with the Southern Caucasus states, in this way or another.

Against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Georgian relations throughout the entire post-Soviet period, whose culmination point were the August 2008 events around South Ossetia, the primary trade and economic partners, that have later become military and political partners of the Caucasian state, have turned out to be Turkey and its main Caucasian ally – Azerbaijan.

Ties among Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia: Energy, Economy, Security

Against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Georgian relations throughout the entire post-Soviet period, whose culmination point were the August 2008 events around South Ossetia, the primary trade and economic partners, that have later become military and political partners of the Caucasian state, have turned out to be Turkey and its main Caucasian ally – Azerbaijan. Apart from the US-supported energy and other communication facilities along the East-

6 R. Ibragimov, "Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations and Turkey's Policy in the Central Caucasus", *Caucasus and Globalization*, Vol. 5, No. 3-4, 2011, pp. 19-20.

7 A. Svarants, "Major Threats to the Interests of the Russian Federation from Ideology and Politics of Pan-Turkism (External and Internal Aspects)", *Region and the World*, Yerevan, No. 1, 2010, p. 11.

8 A. Mardzhanyan, "We and RAND Corporation: Armenian-Turkish Relations", *XXI Century*, Vol. 2, 2011, p. 15.

West line, Ankara and Baku do not conceal their interest in building jointly the surface communication facilities through the Georgian territory and in weakening and blockading Armenia, to the maximum degree possible.

The Georgian-Turkish contacts over several recent years have been very intense and diversified. Back in 2002, the opening ceremony for the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was held in Baku, it was attended by Heydar Aliyev, Eduard Shevarnadze, and then Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. On 13 July, 2006, the pipeline launching ceremony was held in Ceyhan. During the visit of President A. Sezer to Georgia on 14-15 March, 2006, a remarkable agreement was signed on the use of the Baku airport for the purpose of domestic flights by Turkish air carriers and, in this connection, on the reduction of rates for bilateral air carriage up the level existing in Turkey.

In 2007, Turkey and Georgia concluded free trade agreements, including documents designed to avoid double taxation. Subsequently, a tripartite Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani agreement was signed on the transmission of electrical energy and on the future plans for joint sales of electrical energy to Europe.⁹ As estimated by Milli-Mejlis Deputy Rasim Musabekov, the overall investment value of all joint projects of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey is close to 100 billion dollars. According to some publications in the Azerbaijan media, the two Caucasian nations have been supported in matters regarding the oil pipeline security by the NATO through the mediation of Turkey.

Another project of critical importance is the Kars–Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway line (KATB). Its design work was started on 7 February, 2007. On the same day, R.T. Erdoğan took part in the tripartite (Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan) meeting in Tbilisi, where a Tbilisi Declaration on the Common Vision of Regional Cooperation, a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the Energy Sector were signed. The construction of a railway line to Turkey bypassing Armenia, through the Georgian territory, has been delayed repeatedly for various reasons, however, the regular traffic via this railway connection is scheduled to commence in 2015. In one of the joint documents signed by the three parties, the railway line connecting Baku with Kars through the Georgian territory is presented as a “new competitive route between Europe and Asia”, which is due to facilitate the growing trade and the economic development of the region.

9 “The Tbilisi Summit 2014 Gets under Way in Georgia”, *Kavpolit.com*, 06.05.2014, http://kavpolit.com/articles/v_gruzii_startuet_tbilisskij_sammit_2014-4140/

Over the recent years, Turkey has gained a solid standing as a leading counterpart of Tbilisi in the defense sector. A considerable part of the funds provided by Ankara was spent on the modernization and re-equipment of the Marneuli Airport, Georgian Naval defense system and also special operations forces, logistical support and engineer corps. The Turkish government energetically furnished assistance to Tbilisi in building up its Armed Forces by supplying allegedly “non-offensive” weapons and military equipment, including big shipments of armored vehicles, armaments, fire arms. Assistance was also rendered in constructing military installations and personnel training.

2014 and 2015 were marked by the boosting of multi-level contacts within the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan triangle, it made some observers talk about the formation of a new regional alliance, whose role, within the context of worsening relations of Russia and the West, might be very ambivalent. The tripartite meeting of Defense Ministers of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia held in August, 2014, in Nakhichevan¹⁰ prompted many experts to draw a conclusion that the three countries had coordinated their policies in the development of military capabilities more thoroughly.

In mid-May, 2015, two-phase (Baku-Nakhichevan) joint military and tactical exercises of Azerbaijan and Turkey were conducted with the employment of motorized rifle forces, tank units, missile corps, artillery regiments, and anti-aircraft missile troops. A total of 1,000 service men were involved as well as 80 armored vehicles, over 60 artillery pieces and mortars, 12 Air Forces military and transport helicopters, and also “air defense missile units equipped with modern weapons”. It is worth noting that combat artillery and aircraft firing was conducted during the exercises.

Contacts along the line of military economic structures and military agencies have been complemented by the diplomatic efforts. Since 2012, Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey have held their meetings within a tripartite format regularly, and in May, 2014, the first tripartite summit of the Presidents of the three countries took place in Tbilisi.

In parallel to the Georgian-Turkish contacts, relations between Tbilisi and Baku have been developed on the basis of cooperation endeavors dealing with the energy sector and development of military capabilities. Originally, the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations were founded on the basis of good neighborly policies arising from historical, ethnic, cultural, language and religious affinity. It was

10 “Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey Have Agreed to Hold Joint Military Exercises”, *Kavkaz-uzel.ru*, 19.08.2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/247727/>

Turkey, who was the first to recognize the independence of Azerbaijan on 9 November, 1991. The diplomatic relations were established on 14 January, 1992. Throughout the entire post-Soviet period, and especially over the recent several years, the contacts between the heads of state, governments, representatives of various ministries, agencies, military structures, public organizations of Turkey and Azerbaijan have intensified. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry data, only throughout the 1991-1999 period, over 100 Turkish-Azerbaijani agreements were signed regarding cooperation in the economy, culture and other areas.¹¹ Apart from close trade and economic relations, investment collaboration of the two countries has been a matter of paramount importance: Turkey holds the first place among direct investors into the economy of Azerbaijan, it is also the leader in terms of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) accumulated by Azerbaijan abroad. At the same time, as of the late 2013, Azerbaijan held 15th place (1.7%) for its FDI accumulated in the Turkish economy and 2nd place (16.3%) for the Turkish FDI accumulated abroad.¹² However, the situation has changed gradually, and the volume of Azerbaijani investment into Turkey has been rising as the ambitious pipeline projects got started. Thus, plans to develop the Star oil refinery project to the tune of 9.5 billion dollars have got under way. The construction of Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP) is a key link between the currently operating Southern Caucasus gas pipeline and the future Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline (TAP) within the framework of the EU Southern gas corridor), which is scheduled to be launched for 2020. In late June, 2013, the TAP was officially chosen by the Consortium for the development of the Shah Deniz gas field as the route for the natural gas deliveries to Turkey and Europe. The project envisages the transportation of natural gas from the Caspian Sea region through Turkey, Greece, Albania, the Adriatic Sea to the south of Italy, and further to Western Europe. According to some estimates, within the next five years, the investment made by Azerbaijan into the Turkish economy can reach 20 billion dollars.¹³

Of course, the bilateral relations have not been free from disagreement which was most vividly manifest in 2008-2009, at the time of the so-called Armenian-Turkish “football diplomacy”. However, it is not rational to overestimate the importance of such differences. Turkey has consistently provided political and diplomatic support to Azerbaijan in the matters regarding the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In 2010, within the framework of the visit of

11 Semedov, “Basic Aspects of Turkey’s Contemporary Policy in the Caucasus”, p. 50.

12 A.G. Pylin, “Foreign Economic Relations of Azerbaijan within the Context of Regional Integration”, *Problems of Post-Soviet Territories*, No. 1 (3), 2015, pp. 73-74.

13 Pylin, “Foreign Economic Relations of Azerbaijan...”, p. 74.

Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Azerbaijan, an Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support between Turkey and Azerbaijan was signed. In the same year, at the tenth Summit of Presidents of the Turkic Speaking Countries, a Joint Declaration on the Formation of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was signed.¹⁴ The year 2014 witnessed multiple visits of the Turkish Army commanders to Baku and it gave rise to assumptions that a more advanced extensive agreement between the two countries was being prepared to set out security and mutual assistance guarantees in the event of war. Heightened activities between Azerbaijan and Turkey in the military area have prompted some Armenian sources to assert that since early 2015, the Turkish special operations troops have taken part directly in the commando-type reconnaissance sorties in the region of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹⁵

Turkish-Armenian Stalemate in the Southern Caucasus

The original attempts to start a dialogue between Turkey and post-Soviet Armenia were made in the early 1990s, when Yerevan was visited by some Turkish diplomats. However, the developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and around it, the military advances of the Armenian side rendered the planned dialogue impossible. The Turkish government provided substantial financial and administrative assistance to official Baku in its efforts to counteract Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Regardless of that, the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, capable of altering the geopolitical situation in the Southern Caucasus in a tangible manner, has remained an indisputable priority for the external players, who embrace not only several individual countries, but also a number of international organizations. Thus, already in the mid-1990s, some expressed their ideas about “reconciling” Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey by means of “pipeline diplomacy”. A joint Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission was entrusted with the responsibility to handle the contentious and painful issues, which customarily constituted the reason for mutual accusations. Although the Commission’s work was only relatively successful, in 2003, a series of bilateral consultations got under way in Switzerland; a number of cultural and humanitarian projects designed to build up contacts between separate groups of the Turkish and Armenian communities were launched.

14 Avatkov, “Foreign Policy Line of the Republic of Turkey...”, p. 16.

15 M. Agadzhanian, “Azerbaijan and Turkey Are Getting Close on the Anti-Armenian Platform with the NATO Silent Agreement”, *Kavkazoved.info*, 09.02.2015, <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2015/02/09/azerbajdzhan-i-turcia-sblizhajutsja-na-antiarmjanskoj-voennoj-platfome-pri-molchalivom-soglasii-nato.html>

Some authors tend to link the idea of normalizing the Turkish-Armenian relations with the prospect of formulating the so-termed Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) advanced by then Turkish Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan in August, 2008, in the period when the Russian-Georgian relations worsened in connection with the developments around South Ossetia.¹⁶

However, the above Platform, despite certain efforts on behalf of interested parties, has never materialized. In his fundamental research for the RAND Corporation, F. Stephen Larrabee lists the essential benefits that can be obtained from the improvement in the Armenian-Turkish relations, from the point of view of the US-Turkish partnership. First, it would allow Armenia to reduce its economic and political dependence on Moscow. Second, it would impart momentum to the process of Turkey's accession to the EU. Third, it could allow Armenia to be integrated into the projects dealing with the regional energy and economic development, from which it is currently isolated. Finally, fourth, it would allow to reduce the pressure exerted by the Armenian lobbyists on the Capitol Hill.¹⁷

According to the assumption made by some Armenian experts, the normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations was one of the priorities for the Western centers of power, and for this reason, the leadership of both sides experienced certain pressure from the outside.

In September, 2008, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan invited his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gül to Yerevan to watch the match between the national teams of the two countries, who appeared to be in the same group of the World Cup Qualification in 2010. The invitation was not ignored, and later the Armenian President made a reciprocal "football" visit to Bursa. The culmination of the "football diplomacy" was the signing of the Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia and the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations on 10 October, 2009, in Zurich by the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Turkey. The documents envisaged the restoration of relations between the two countries without any preconditions attached, involving the opening of the diplomatic missions and unblocking the frontier and transport service. As regards the sensitive issues in the history of bilateral relation, the sides agreed

16 Ibragimov, "Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations and Turkey's Policy...", p. 21.

17 F. Stephen Larrabee, "Troubled Partnership. U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change", *Rand Corporation*, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG899.pdf, pp. 51-54.

to set up joint commissions for exploring all the circumstances involved, if appropriate. However, the process of ratification of the two Protocols in the Parliaments of Armenia and Turkey was suspended due to a number of internal and external reasons, and it has not been fully completed until now.

Despite the recurrent consultations that take place on a period basis, the former optimism over the soonest normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations is no longer in place. In 2014-2015, the activities of the structures operating under the aegis of the Islamic State terrorist group in Syria and Iraq were on the rise, although a US-led coalition was created. This is especially relevant to the situation around Syria, where, despite a substantial outflow of Armenians, a large Armenian community has remained. Within the context of its security, all actions made by Turkey are perceived in Yerevan with a considerable degree of mistrust and anxiety. The Turkish authorities, as a minimum, did not prevent the Islamic State forces from being redeployed using its territory, in 2014-2015 they attacked the Kurdish towns of Kobani and Haseke in Syria.

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It is not excluded that Yerevan and Ankara can be presented with alternative proposals. The resumption of the negotiation process between Yerevan and Ankara is one of the priorities for the US policies in the region, as it provides additional opportunities for the US to exert its influence on the situation in a more comprehensive manner. At the same time, the question regarding the Russian stance on the feasible resumption of the Armenian-Turkish negotiation process is very interesting. As is well known, in 2009, Moscow welcomed the signing of the Zurich Protocols. It was perfectly logical within the context of the Russian-Turkish dialogue gaining momentum at that time and the declared “reset” in the Russian-American relations, which was supposed to include the Caucasian and Middle Eastern dimension.¹⁸ Notwithstanding, many illusions were dispelled afterwards, moreover, the Turkish authorities have persistently stood their ground that the normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations should be linked stiffly to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under the preferential terms suggested by Azerbaijan. The Turkish politicians have repeatedly asserted that they treat the Nagorno-Karabakh problem as if it were their own one, and they will have it on their immediate agenda, insisting on the non-acceptance of the prevailing status quo. Thus, in early March, 2015,

18 For more information, please refer to: A. Areshev, “A New Round of Armenian-Turkish ‘Game’ and Russia”, *Fondsk.ru*, 03.10.2011, <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2011/10/03/novyj-raund-armjano-tureckoj-igry-i-rossija.html>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan again said that Turkey would not open its border to Armenia unless the latter surrendered the territories seized from Azerbaijan. “If at least one of the occupied Azerbaijani areas is surrendered, Turkey might open the frontier with Armenia”, said Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu at a meeting with representatives of Turkey’s national minorities.

Notwithstanding the public statements made by First Deputy Defense Minister of Armenia David Tonoyan to the effect that no threat is seen in Armenia in connection with the strengthening of defense, military and political cooperation among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, the situation does not seem to be so unambiguous in reality. There is a prevailing opinion in Yerevan in relation to the willingness of Ankara and Baku to use the existing problems in the Armenian-Georgian relations for the sake of exacerbating the Georgian-Armenian relations.

It can be assumed that the new attempts at reinvigorating the Armenian-Turkish negotiation process will be made upon the resolution of the 2015 political crisis in Turkey and after the election (most probably - after the adoption of a new Constitution for the country that would imply a transition to the Parliamentary form of governance) of the new members of the National Assembly of Armenia.¹⁹

Conclusion

Today, in matters of domestic policy, as well as in its foreign policy, Turkey is faced with a lot of difficulties. The year 2015 has been marked by the rising tensions over the Syrian crisis and the increasing number of refugees that have provoked internal conflicts around social issues and other problems. Some communication facilities have been subjected to the attacks by Kurdish military formations, which can challenge Turkey’s position as a reliable transit country for energy resources. All of these processes have developed against the backdrop of tensions that have persisted since March, 2014, over the upcoming elections, lack of consensus among major political forces on the issue of forming the new government, which is an extra factor triggering internal political instability.²⁰

All of the above can negatively affect the security structure in the Southern Caucasus, which is far from being fully and adequately designed, as it depends

19 The appropriate conclusion can be drawn, although indirectly, if the election lists presented by different parties (which include quite a lot of those who support the ratification of the ballot results reports) are subjected to analysis.

20 Yu. Mavashev, “Will Turkey Be Factionalized?”, *Kavkazgeoclub.ru*, 25.08.2015, <http://kavkazgeoclub.ru/content/raspadetsya-li-turciya>

on the regional environment as well as on the relationships among the major regional players. In the long-term perspective, in contrast to the anti-Western rhetoric of some political figures, Turkey's connections with the US and NATO will not get any weaker, as a minimum. Apart from that, Ankara's policy in the Caucasus direction will be dictated, among other things, by the logics of geopolitical interests of this country, and also by some external factors (for example, the activities pursued on the country's territory by representatives of the Southern Caucasus diasporas, primarily those who come from Azerbaijan).

Even if a close tripartite format of interaction among Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia is not fully reflected in the statutory legally binding international documents, it has *de facto* proved a very strong nature. Moreover, this alliance sustained by common interests, cannot fail to be the focus of attention for the US and NATO, who have declared their tasks of "containing" Russia.

Despite its closeness and *de facto* allied relationship with Ankara, Baku remains Russia's partner, and is fully aware of the fact that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not possible without Moscow. There are no "full-format" Turkish military bases on the territory of Azerbaijan, and the level of its military and technological cooperation with Ankara has not reached its maximum. Theoretically, it can be expanded, however, Baku's military and technological cooperation with Moscow is a deterrent along this road.

Turkey's policy towards Armenia will depend on the dynamics of the resolution of the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh, as before, and also on the feasible desire of external forces to actualize the dialogue between Ankara and Yerevan, as a result of which there can be at least a partial normalization of relations between the two states. Armenia's membership in the military and political Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), close relations with Russia will remain to be critical elements of its external security architecture, *inter alia*, in the light of unsettled differences with Turkey and the increasing risks posed by the Islamic State.

The concrete plans and measures to build up joint military formations of the three countries are on the current agenda, as before, and military assistance from Turkey to Georgia and Azerbaijan continues to be a powerful factor, which gives rise to apprehension and suspicions on behalf of other players, who are not included in the format of interaction of the above three states. The development of the system of regional security in the Caucasus with emphasis on the key role of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, will depend on the level of trust among the countries, which constitute this "triangle", and on the efficient handling of the Russian-Turkish and Iranian-Turkish controversy concerning their approach to the resolution of the Syrian crisis and a number of other urgent problems.

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