



Research Article

Turkey's Caucasus Policies, 2000-2022

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Abstract: The emergence of newly independent states in the Caucasus at the end of the Cold War presented challenges to Turkey while enlarging its role. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the century-old Soviet/Russian threat, simultaneously creating a power vacuum on Turkey's borders. While Turkey had traditionally avoided involvement in regional politics, it has since been drawn into the volatile new politics of the region. In this environment, Turkey became an important actor in the region due to its strong historical ties, the attraction of its geographic position linking the region to Europe, and its economic, political, and security relationships with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Over the past thirty years, Turkey has become one of the prominent players in a region where its involvement has again increased recently after the Second Karabakh War. Although its re-engagement with Armenia is progressing slowly, and geopolitical changes and economic and political conditions in the region are unlikely to stabilize for some years, it is evident that Turkey will continue to create new networks of interdependency between Ankara and the regional capitals.

Keywords: Turkey, Caucasus, interdependence, geopolitics, international competition, energy resources.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, brought challenges and opportunities for both regional and global powers in the early 1990s. While a power vacuum was created in the Caucasus with the disappearance of the USSR and the emergence of the newly independent states, Turkey felt the urgency of new openings in its foreign and defense policies holding advantages from its geostrategic location bordering the region. As the Caucasian countries have completed their third decade as independent

states and the geopolitics of the Caucasus have evolved substantially, the main lines of Turkish policy towards the region that emerged in the first half of the 1990s have not changed much, though adapting to various geopolitical challenges along the way. In a sense, the main policy trajectories of Turkey in the Caucasus have proven quite resilient despite multiple challenges, showing qualities of a complex understanding of regional dynamics. Thus, if one needs to understand the current Turkish policy towards the region, the analysis should start from the basic parameters developed earlier.

General Parameters of Turkey's Approach to the Caucasus

First of all, Turkey has strongly endorsed the sovereignty and independence of all Caucasian countries since their independence. This included calls for reinforcing their political institutions, building up their economic welfare, international autonomy, and internal social accord. Rather than being simple rhetoric, this was seen as a strategic priority for Turkey's Caucasian policy, closely related to the fears emanating from the competition of external forces for influence over the region and the fact that any instability there could have easily spilled over into Turkish territory. It has been clear that Turkish decision-makers had assumed that if these countries could be empowered enough to resist outside pressures and interventions, then Turkey's historical, political, economic, and strategic pull would gently push them toward Turkey's orbit.

As independent countries, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia create a buffer zone between Turkey and its historical rival in the Caucasus: Russia. For centuries, it was Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union that posed threats to the Ottoman Empire and, later, to Turkey. At the end of the Cold War, for the first time in history, Turkey no longer shared a land border with its big northern neighbor. Turkey believed that the best way to reinforce this position was to support the independence, stability, and territorial integrity of the newly independent Caucasian states. It was understood that, as long as these states could keep their freedom and political stability, it would be difficult for Russia to have an overbearing influence over them near the Turkish border.¹ Thus, Turkey opposed, more or less until the 2010s, moves from Russia to stage a political comeback to the region, either through socio-economic inroads it had been able to develop or in the form of Russian soldiers on Turkish borders. The fact that Russia has nevertheless managed to do both in recent years highlights the weaknesses of Turkey's position in the region as much as Russia's abilities.

There has also been an understanding that the stability of the Caucasian countries bordering Turkey would directly affect its security and stability. There

¹ Mustafa Aydın, "1990-2001 Kafkasya ve Orta Asya'yla İlişkiler [Relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus, 1990-2001]," in *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumla [Turkish Foreign Policy: Facts from the War of Independence to the Present, Documents, Comments]*, ed. Baskın Oran (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002), p. 406.

is an acute realization that if any of the Caucasian countries slide into instability, it could, if not spill over into Turkey, easily affect Turkey's trade and transport relations with many countries in the east. It became apparent during the early 1990s that, even if Turkey did not wish to be involved in regional conflicts, it was almost impossible to be completely aloof from the developments as many Turkish citizens had Caucasian ancestry, thus fostering continued interest in the region. The Turkish public had developed a strong sense of kinship, especially in the case of Azerbaijan.

The Turkish perspective emphasizes that the territorial integrities of the Caucasian countries are intertwined with power politics in the region. Turkey's approach to disputes involving Abkhazia, Abkhazia, and Ossetia in Georgia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, is firmly rooted in its foreign policy stance against altering the borders of sovereign states. This position stems from the understanding that, should the boundaries of any country in the neighborhood change by force, it might easily trigger a chain reaction that could engulf the whole region, thus endangering Turkey's borders.

Another key priority for Turkey has been to establish itself as an energy and transport hub, with a primary focus on facilitating the transportation of Caspian oil and gas to Europe. This initiative involves utilizing the Ceyhan port for shipments and various pipelines, as well as fostering air travel via Istanbul airports. Notably, Turkish Airlines was the first international carrier to launch regular direct flights to regional capitals, remaining a popular choice for air passengers heading to Western destinations. Additionally, the involvement of a Turkish-operated Batumi Airport, along with Turkish Airlines using it as a hub for Turkish passengers traveling to and from nearby towns without requiring passports, represents an innovative approach to regional cooperation.

On the other hand, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) and TANAP gas pipelines, as well as Blue Stream (I and II) and Turkish Stream natural gas pipelines from Russia and all the other regional connections (Turkmen, Iranian and Iraqi gas) are aimed to make Turkey a regional energy player. However, Turkey has not been alone in the competition. Many have seen the pipelines as critical factors in securing and maintaining influence throughout the region in addition to financial gains. As the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict made the Armenian route unrealizable early on, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have become strategic partners in pipeline politics. Thus, Turkey's hope that such connections would create interdependences in the region that could strengthen Turkey's standing in this troubled neighborhood has proven accurate in the long run.

The development of bilateral relations also has had vital importance to Turkey to enhance its regional influence. It was calculated that linking to the region as much as possible would bring Turkey strategic and economic gains and inroads not only in the Caucasus but also in Central Asia, increasing its prestige in the region and the broader world politics. Upon establishing closer bilateral ties with regional countries, it became evident that Turkey shared many com-

monalities not only with Azerbaijanis but also with Georgians and Armenians, more so than previously perceived.

Nevertheless, Turkey's relations with Armenia and its stance on the Abkhazian and Southern Ossetian conflicts have been influenced by historical legacies. Despite Turkey's immediate recognition of Armenia's independence upon its declaration, the establishment of diplomatic relations has been hindered due to historical factors such as the events of 1915, border recognition issues, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Concerning conflicts within Georgia, Turkey's approach has been shaped by the significant population with origins in the North Caucasus—up to 6 million Turkish citizens—who remain politically influential and highly engaged.

In its approach to the region, another crucial factor for Turkey to consider is the position and policies of the Russian Federation. Despite a period when Russia was momentarily less involved in the Caucasus, its “near abroad” policy, declared at the end of 1993, signaled ongoing interests in the former-Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russia's subsequent economic and political resurgence ultimately repositioned it in the regional dynamics.² On the other hand, in the 1990s, Turkey had the support of the West, especially the US, but did not possess adequate economic resources and political power to compete with Russia. Consequently, Turkey became more aware of the risks of confrontation and shifted towards emphasizing the benefits of cooperation and coexistence with Russia since 1994. This shift was accompanied by a growth in trade and political connections. This realization, coupled with Turkey's cooling of relations with its traditional allies—the US and the EU countries—resulted in moves to normalize its relations with the Russian Federation in the early 2000s. When Turkey's attention moved to the broader Middle East and Africa with the Arab uprisings and following instability on Turkey's borders, this eventually led in the 2010s to the wavering of Turkey's Caucasian focus and increased Russian presence and influence in the region.

A prior objective was to encourage the economic, political, social, and security sector transformation of the Caucasian countries and their integration into the wider European (western) structures. This was believed to pave the way for Turkey's enhanced presence in the region and, leveraging its economic strength, position Turkey as a more influential regional player. Although this was also proved viable as Turkey had become the biggest trade partner of both Georgia and Azerbaijan and an important trader for Armenia, even though the land border between them remained closed, Turkey could not sustain it in the long run except with Azerbaijan. Moreover, Turkey's moving away from its traditional allies and developing its cooperation with Russia also affected its posi-

² İdil Tuncer, “Rusya Federasyonu'nun Yeni Güvenlik Doktrini: Yakın Çevre ve Türkiye” [The New Security Doctrine of Russian Federation: Near Abroad and Turkey], in *En Uzun Onyıl, Türkiye'nin Ulusal Güvenlik ve Dış Politika Gündeminde Doksanlı Yıllar* [The Longest Decade; 1990s in Turkey's National Security and Foreign Policy Agenda], ed. Gencer Özkan and Şule Kut (Istanbul: Buke Yayınları, 2000), 435-460.

tion in the region, as part of Turkey's attraction for the regional countries was its connection to the West.

The Policies of the First AKP Government in the Caucasus

Despite expectations to the contrary, the fundamental framework of Turkish policy towards the Caucasian states remained unchanged following the Justice and Development Party's (*AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) rise to power in November 2002. However, subsequent domestic and global developments soon influenced the government's priorities and stance towards the region.

In the immediate aftermath of the change of government in Turkey, there were questions about the commitments of the new leadership towards the region and speculations that it would not be as strongly predisposed towards closer relations with the Caucasian and Central Asian republics as their predecessors because of their holistic Islamic rhetoric. Indeed, instead of highlighting the historical and cultural ties with the regional countries, the AKP governments shifted Turkey's focus to developing economic relations.³ Moreover, the apparent non-interest of the AKP towards the region was soon exacerbated by the intense agenda of the government with international developments such as the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Cyprus-related discussions, the referendum on the Annan Plan in 2004, the start of full membership negotiations with the EU in 2005, continuing PKK terror with transborder movements, as well as multiple domestic political crises that began with the candidacy of Abdullah Gul for the presidency in April 2007 leading to early general elections in July 2007 and culminating in a closure case against the AKP at the Constitutional Court, which took another eight months to resolve. Amid the intensifying domestic political crises, the government refrained from making assertive foreign policy moves, including those towards the Caucasus, until the end of 2008.

However, once these multiple crises were somewhat contained and especially after the August 2008 War between Georgia and Russia, which once again reminded Turkey of the volatile nature of the region, the AKP government began to pay closer attention to regional developments. It came with its initiative regarding the future of the Caucasus: The Caucasus Stability and Economic Cooperation Platform, bringing together Turkey and Russia with the three Caucasian states. Although it was not an altogether new idea, the Platform initiative was the only proposal with a long-term view and region-wide approach. Almost impossible to realize due to realities on the ground, it nevertheless provided the necessary basis for Turkey's opening to Armenia in 2009.

³ R.T. Erdoğan's visit to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in January 2003 even before becoming prime minister was cited as proof of his interest in the region. See Mevlut Katik, "Turkish Party Leader Seeks Favor in Central Asia," *EurasiaNet*, January 14, 2003, <https://eurasianet.org/turkish-party-leader-seeks-favor-in-central-asia>.

In the meantime, AKP's Caucasian policy was also affected by ideas raised by the then Foreign Policy Advisor of the Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to the effect that Turkey should have its own "neighborhood policy" based on "zero problems with neighbors" and "region-based foreign policy" principles. Once these ideas were formulated towards the middle of the first AKP government, they signified a new understanding of Turkey's foreign policy, refocusing it on regional matters from 2006 onwards. Due to the abovementioned international and domestic developments, these ideas were not put into practice until after the July 2007 general elections.

Even before that, the only area in which there was some movement was the government's interest in the energy area. It pursued an active policy to bring alternative resources to Turkey for both Turkish consumption and transiting it to Europe. The idea of Turkey becoming a "regional energy hub" was given prompt support, and Turkey undertook policies designed to strengthen its connections to Caspian resources through Georgia and Azerbaijan. In addition to the realization of BTC and BTE pipelines, Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan finalized and signed a framework agreement in 2007 to construct a Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railroad connection between them,⁴ bypassing Armenia and linking Turkey with these countries as well as Central Asia. This critical initiative and the completion of the BTE natural gas and BTC oil pipelines had effects on regional development and security going far beyond the energy and transportation sectors.⁵

In the meantime, the BTE gas pipeline became operational in March 2007 with the delivery of gas from Shah Deniz of Azerbaijan, effectively ending Georgia's gas dependency on Russia and providing an alternative source to Turkey. Natural gas destined for Turkey was initially diverted to Georgia, in agreement with Turkey, when Georgia was experiencing gas shortages due to its heightened tension with Russia and the latter's retaliation by stopping gas delivery in the winter of 2007.

In addition to the advantages the project brought to the three countries' relations and their strategic importance to each other, it also showed an important alternative route for gas transportation to Europe. It enabled Turkey to start dreaming about becoming an energy corridor. Turkey was also encouraged by the construction and operation of the BTC oil pipeline, which became operational in 2006, even before the BTE. Another pipeline project that captured the world's attention at the time was the *Nabucco* project linking the natural gas resources of Azerbaijan and possibly Iran, Iraq, and Turkmenistan to Europe. Although an intergovernmental agreement was signed between Turkey, Austria, Bulgaria, and Hungary and witnessed by the representatives of

⁴ Güncel Haberler, "Bakü-Tiflis-Kars Demiryolu Canlanıyor [Baku-Tiflis-Kars Railway Canal]," September 19, 2007, <http://www.haberler.com/baku-tiflis-kars-demiryolu-canlaniyor-haberi/>.

⁵ Massimo Gaudiano, "Can Energy Security Cooperation Help Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to Strengthen Western Oriented Links?" NATO Defense College Academic Research Branch, Research Note No. 5, June 2007, 1-2.

other countries on July 13, 2009, providing a legal framework and highlighting the intention of these countries to build the pipeline,⁶ Turkey then also signed an agreement with the visiting Russian premier Vladimir Putin on August 7, 2009, also witnessed by the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi⁷ to start a feasibility study on Turkish economic zone in the Black Sea regarding the South Stream gas pipeline project, which many considered as a direct competitor to proposed *Nabucco* line. While Turkey, as a result of all these projects, was able to position itself successfully once again between the energy-producing countries of the East and energy-hungry countries of the West by the middle of 2009, both the Nabucco Project and the South Stream Project were canceled, to be replaced by the TANAP (The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline), which became operational in 2018 and linked to TAP (Trans-Adriatic Pipeline) in 2020, and the Turk Stream that also became operational in 2020.

Repositioning of Turkey's Policies in the Caucasus after August 2008

The August 2008 crisis affected Turkish policy towards the Caucasus in multiple ways and forced it to reconsider its approach. The conflict showed clearly that the "frozen" conflicts of the Caucasus were not so frozen and could ignite at any moment. Given the heavy military procurements of involved parties, simply waiting for the problems to solve themselves was not an option. Moreover, Russia clearly indicated its intentions regarding regional hotspots in case of opening the second round of warfare. Turkey eventually recognized that unless it took an active role and managed to pacify the region, the Caucasus would swiftly succumb to instability and neglect, which would not align with Turkish interests in politics, economics, or security.

Although Turkey's bilateral economic and political relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia continued to improve, its overall Caucasian policies seemed convoluted by the developments beyond Turkey's control. Turkey and Georgia had formed the skeleton of gas and oil pipelines, offering alternatives to routes passing through Iran or Russia. By providing more secure alternative routes for Europe and the US and contributing to the region's stability, the development of bilateral relations between Turkey and Georgia in every field has been supported by the West. Besides their political relations, the economic relations between Turkey and Georgia have improved rapidly. Turkey became the most significant trade partner and the second biggest investor in Georgia, leading to a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries in 2007.⁸ The movement of

⁶ "EU Countries Sign Geopolitical Nabucco Agreement," *EurActiv*, July 14, 2009, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/eu-countries-sign-geopolitical-nabucco-agreement/>.

⁷ "Yüzyılın anlaşmaları imzalandı [Contracts of the century signed]," *HaberTürk*, August 7, 2009.

⁸ "Free Trade Agreement between the Republic of Turkey and Georgia," <https://trade.gov.tr/data/5b9111f813b8770becf1e74b/3084ba862ac8810125184a17da1112da.pdf>.

people between the two countries was enhanced by lifting the visa requirement for 90-day stays in 2007 and the opening of the Batumi airport, which was built and operated by a Turkish company as a domestic destination for Turkish citizens.

While economic and political relations between Turkey and Georgia continued to improve, the uneasy situation in Georgia caused by the Abkhazia dispute stayed unresolved and somewhat tainted their relations. Even though Turkey continued to support the territorial integrity of Georgia, it also pushed for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. However, the existence of both Georgian and North Caucasian origin Turkish citizens complicated Turkey's stance, creating suspicions on both sides, thus preventing repeated Turkish attempts to develop a platform for a peaceful resolution to bear fruit. Moreover, Turkey faced an increasingly volatile home ground as both Georgian and North Caucasian diasporas living in Turkey became vocal in their demands, forcing Turkey to become even more cautious in its dealings with Georgia.

The August 2008 crisis exposed the weaknesses and limitations faced by Turkey concerning these problems. When Georgia and Russia engaged in hostilities, Turkey found its policy options limited on three grounds. First of all, Turkish citizens of Georgian and North Caucasian descent lobbied the Turkish government, each side seeking Turkey's support for their respective causes. Secondly, Turkey found itself caught between its strategically important partner Georgia and economically and politically important neighbor Russia. The territorial integrity of Georgia was important to and was propped up by Turkey for various political, strategic, psychological, and historical reasons. At the same time, Russia had become Turkey's significant trade and political partner. Thirdly, Turkey was squeezed between the demands of its newly emerging partner, the Russian Federation, and long-term allies, the US and NATO countries. With the multitude of pressures, Turkey's initial response to the crisis was relatively subdued. However, it later became somewhat more active, especially with Prime Minister Erdoğan's direct involvement and the Platform idea he proposed. Although the concept did not advance significantly, it laid the groundwork for a potential reconnection between Turkey and Armenia.

Armenia has been the only Caucasian country with which Turkey's bilateral relations, up until very recently, did not show big improvement. While there was an understanding on both sides to develop ties in the early 1990s, it was replaced by the mid-1990s with suspicion and distrust due to regional and domestic developments on both sides and the historical baggage that the two countries bring into their current relationship. As a result, the land border between them remained closed, and diplomatic relations were not established.

On the other hand, the problematic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, alongside its isolation from the enhanced cooperation in the region, have been negatively affecting the economic recovery of Armenia. Deteriorating conditions sent many Armenians to seek employment in neighboring countries. As a result, even though the land border remained closed, some forty thousand Ar-

menians came to Turkey by the end of 2006 for employment.⁹ By the end of 2007, Turkish officials were regularly quoting 70 000 as the figure regarding Armenian citizens working illegally in Turkey.¹⁰

Under these circumstances, the political relations took an exciting turn when newly elected Armenian president Serzh Sarkisyan invited President Abdullah Gul to watch the football match between the Turkish and Armenian national teams played in Yerevan on September 6, 2008. President Gul's acceptance of the invitation and later his travel to Yerevan in the first-ever visit of a Turkish Head of State marked a watershed in Turkish-Armenian relations, raising hopes for reconciliation and providing the necessary political push for the long-time secretive talks between Turkish and Armenian officials to normalize the relationship. The initiative seemed to pave the way to the April 22, 2009, Turkish-Armenian framework agreement toward reconciliation. The brief statement posted on the websites of both Turkish and Armenian foreign ministries said that "the two parties have achieved tangible progress and ... have agreed on a comprehensive framework for the normalization of their bilateral relations."¹¹

However, the Azerbaijani reaction to the potential opening of the Turkish-Armenian border without any progress on the Karabakh issue generated a strong backlash in Turkey. This led Prime Minister Erdoğan to halt developments during his visit to Baku on May 13, 2009, and announce that Turkey would not move forward to open its land border with Armenia unless the latter ceased its occupation of Azerbaijani territory. When Turkey and Armenia were set to announce on August 31 that they had reached an agreement on two protocols, intending to sign them in due course, it appeared that Turkey might be able to clarify its position to Azerbaijan. Consequently, the Azerbaijani responses were more subdued this time, and Turkey signed the protocols on October 11, 2009. However, it was made clear inside the country that the Turkish Parliament would not try to force the ratification of the protocols. The majority opposed such a move unless positive developments were seen toward resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

Although relations with Azerbaijan briefly soured over Turkish moves towards Armenia, the overall relationship bounced back after the non-ratification of the protocols, eventually reaching a stage that could be classified as a strategic partnership. Not only do BTC and BTE pipelines and the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku

⁹ As reported in the *Economist*, November 17, 2006.

¹⁰ http://www.cagdaskitap.netteyim.net/haber/Siyaset/turkiyede_kac_kacak_ermeni_isc_i_var-haberi-11356.html and www.milliyet.com.tr/2006/11/18/siyaset/siy09.html.

¹¹ Charles Recknagel, "Turkey, Armenia Announce Framework for Normalizing Ties," *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*, April 23, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Says_Agrees_Framework_For_Ties_With_Armenia/1614312.html; and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Turkey and Armenia in Broad Accord," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/22/AR2009042203888.html>.

railroad make the two countries strategically connected, but economic relations and mutual investments have also become substantial.

Turkish-Azeri relations have also expanded into education and cultural fields. Azeri students pursue education in Turkey, and young diplomats receive training in Turkey through the Turkish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Turkey strongly supported the re-introduction of the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan, preparing and sending textbooks, thus bringing the two countries' use of the "Turkish" language even closer. Turkish television channels enjoy significant viewership in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Azerbaijan hosts 15 middle schools and 11 high schools supported by direct Turkish investment, along with a university in Azerbaijan that was established with Turkish contributions. These cultural initiatives foster closer public relations, complementing and strengthening political ties.

Impact of the Second NK War and Turkey's "Return" to the Caucasus

The 44-day war over Nagorno-Karabakh in September-November 2020 has implications for Turkey's Caucasian policies, especially concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan. First, it marks a comeback and jolting activity for Turkey to the region after many years of inertia.

The post-war changes in the region have allowed Turkey to redefine its role in the area. Turkey became an eager player in July 2020 and has become an integral part of the truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan, signed on November 10, 2020. While the current status quo highlighted Russia's role in the region as a peace broker and an important political actor, it also empowered Turkey as the main balancing power to the potentially threatening position of the Russian Federation in the future. While Russia has positioned its military forces, serving diverse roles, in each Caucasian country after 30 years, it has established an incredibly delicate status quo fraught with risks.

While various ideas related to regional cooperation are being discussed, it may be premature to offer a definitive assessment. However, it is reasonable to assume that if any projects aimed at reopening closed trade routes and facilitating the movement of goods in the region materialize, Turkey stands to gain from them, given its economic positioning and connections beyond the region.

Turkey's support of Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War extended beyond its traditional political and broader security support to Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia. As such, Turkey earned much respect and gratitude from Azerbaijani society, potentially leading to increased cooperation in international affairs and economic projects. It certainly provided an opportunity to intensify and deepen their existing relationship, collaboration, and strategic partnership. Beyond this, Turkey's current positioning in the region, and especially its military presence on the Azerbaijani territory, albeit small, alleviates some of the fears and annoyance in the Azerbaijani society for hosting Russian peacekeeping forces after so many years, thereby helping to calm the situation.

The war, ending with Azerbaijan gaining its occupied territories back, has also removed one of the obstacles preventing Armenian-Turkish normalization. In the previous round, when the two countries moved for reconciliation with the signing of the Zurich Accords in 2009, Azerbaijani objections and the Turkish public's sympathy for them prevented Turkish leaders from going ahead with them. In the end, the Turkish Prime Minister at the time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, declared that Turkey would not move to normalize its relations and open its land border with Armenia as long as the Azerbaijani territories remained under occupation. As this issue was removed by the end of the war, it opened the way for Turkish-Armenian normalization, and as a result, the two countries have since moved ahead with bilateral talks. The current expectation from Turkish, Armenian, and international sources is that these talks would eventually lead the way to gradual normalization, that is, establishing diplomatic relations and opening land borders. Other tentative moves have already been implemented, such as re-establishing regular air connection, allowing trade to resume through third countries, and opening air spaces to their national airways. If these moves achieve aimed normalization of relations as expected, this would finally complete Turkey's connection to all the Caucasian countries, potentially paving the way to further regional cooperation and development.

Although Turkish leaders were eager to rehash and promote one of the earlier regional security cooperation ideas in the 3+3 format (i.e., bringing the three Caucasian countries with Russia, Turkey, and Iran in a security organization), and received support from Russia, it would be too optimistic to expect such an idea taking off the ground given the current regional and international environment. One of the main obstacles is the absolute disdain Georgia has for such an idea that could eventually bring it together with what it sees as the country occupying its territories, i.e., Russia. There also exists distrust of Azerbaijan to Iranian intentions, the unresolved issue of Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia, yet to be tackled Armenian-Turkish historical baggage, and Russia's current war with Ukraine and its potential implications for the region.

Nevertheless, even if the ideas for further regional economic integration, political engagement, and security cooperation did not turn out as expected, it is a fact that for the first time since the end of the Cold War and the independence of the three Caucasian countries that Turkey has an opportunity to have cordial relations with all of them, augmented with enhanced security, political, and economic relations with Azerbaijan, and strong connections through shared interests in terms of existing energy and transport lines, trade and security cooperation with Georgia. Furthermore, proposed transport connections and linkages, if realized, would allow the deepening of its ties to all three countries. The future will reveal whether Turkey could finally leverage all these opportunities for its benefit and be able to contribute to further stabilization of the region.

Conclusion

Turkey's policies regarding the Caucasus have gone through various stages and ups and downs since the end of the Cold War. While the century-old Soviet/Russian threat to Turkey's security has disappeared with the collapse of the USSR, the vacuum created by this departure became a breeding ground for potential risks and threats on Turkey's borders. Even if Turkey's initial vision and optimistic approaches towards the region in the early 1990s proved somewhat unrealistic, its effects set the tone for Turkish policies.

The emergence of independent republics in the Caucasus was a significant turning point in Turkey's regional role and policies. It has become one of the crucial players in a region where it previously had only a marginal involvement. Although the existing tensions in the area will continue to be contributing factors for Turkish security planning and several challenges still need to be tackled before the region can function in stability, Turkey will no doubt try to play a role in regional developments through multi-layered policy openings. Whether Turkey will be successful in its new opening and recent retuning of its policies towards the region is still an open question and will depend on various regional and international developments, sometimes beyond the control of Turkey or the regional countries. In this limited opportunity environment, by creating innovative solutions to regional problems and putting the region into a broader context, Turkey can widen the geography where stable countries cooperate in multilateral conventions and their bilateral relationships. If successful, their positive results would multiply impact, just as negative consequences will have repercussions in a much wider area.

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Acknowledgment

Connections: The Quarterly Journal, Vol. 22, 2023, is supported by the United States government.