

Turkey's Caucasus Policies in the Framework of Ankara's *New Foreign Policy*

By Nigar Goksel, Istanbul

Abstract

In recent years, Turkey has sought to diversify its foreign policy away from the West to focus more on neighboring regions by becoming a regional economic power, energy hub and using its Islamic credentials. The Middle East, where global attention has also been relatively more centered, has been more important than the Caucasus in the last decade of Turkey's foreign policy. Turkey's improved ties with Russia have disappointed allies in both the West and Georgia. Similarly, Turkey's leaders shelved their overtures to Armenia when they foreseeably ran into opposition from the Azerbaijanis and domestic public opinion. Rather than turn away from the Caucasus, Turkey should pursue more consistent and long term policies that make it possible to achieve its goals of open borders, resolved conflicts, soft power and economic interdependence.

Turkey's Policy Goals

Turkey's foreign policy discourse of recent years articulates the pursuit of multi-dimensional and proactive policies in order to maximize Turkey's strategic strength on the world stage. To this end, one central aim has been to 'correct' Turkey's traditional 'overemphasis on ties with Western Europe and the United States.' Turkey's leaders reason that Turkey has fallen short of optimizing its potential because it has limited its scope to the West, neglecting neighboring regions such as Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Turkey's traditional alignment with the West naturally pitted it against countries like Iran and Russia, and led such countries to collaborate *against* Turkey and curb Turkey's strategic depth. Related to this orientation is a pronounced recognition that confrontation with neighbors drains Turkey and prevents it from realizing its potential—thus the articulation of the “zero problems with neighbors” motto. Reducing neighbors' incentives to counter Turkish interests has emerged as a guiding principle in Turkish foreign policy. This thinking also informed Turkey's initiative to normalize relations with Armenia in 2009.

Perceived Western failures in the region—such as the inability of the US to play a decisive role and the EU's failure to put forth a unified position on key strategic questions—have fed an emerging conviction in Turkey that 'diversification' from the Western orientation is needed. Turkey has steered away from acting as an extension of the Transatlantic bloc, particularly where confronting Russian interests would be the case. This was apparent in Ankara's opposition to the US proposal to extend NATO's Mediterranean naval Operation Active Endeavor into the Black Sea in 2005.

Besides limiting its association with the West and solving problems with neighbors, Ankara has sought to maximize its regional power by becoming a regional economic powerhouse and energy hub, while also using Islam as a soft power instrument.

A central pillar of Turkish foreign policy has been advancing Turkish economic growth and business community interests. The Turkish government has capitalized on stronger political relations with its neighbors to extract economic advantages for Turkish businesses. Visa-free travel regimes, free trade agreements and the like have also increased Turkey's soft power. In the Caucasus, Ankara has paid most attention to the two leading economic players, Russia and Azerbaijan.

Relations with Georgia have also been geared around maximizing mutual economic potential. Armenia is an anomaly in this case—with economic relations limited by the closed border and lack of diplomatic relations. (Given that the pursuit of normal economic relations with Armenia comes with the price tag of deteriorating relations with Azerbaijan, and the fact that Armenia's economic potential pales in comparison to Azerbaijan's, the prospective gain of opening the border with Armenia today is not enough incentive for Turkey to follow through with the already controversial course of normalizing relations). Since the economic and political power of most of its Eastern neighbors is entrenched in authoritarian regimes, to reap economic advantages, Ankara has noticeably strayed away from criticizing democracy deficits in these countries.

Besides domestic economic interest groups, public opinion sympathies have also affected Ankara's foreign policy choices both in general and in the Caucasus. Turkish public sympathy for Azerbaijan and the conflicting enthusiasm of Turkish liberal constituencies to reconcile with Armenia shaped Ankara's ultimately incoherent effort to normalize relations with Armenia. Domestic pressure groups, including members of the diaspora from the North Caucasus and Abkhazia, also effect Ankara's rhetoric and policies towards Georgia and Russia.

The Turkish government has taken up the plight of the Azerbaijanis in the Karabakh conflict using a discourse of protecting *victims* which “the West” neglects.

Even though Karabakh gets less attention than distinctly 'Muslim causes' such as the Palestinian issue, support for the Azerbaijanis helps the government score points (read *votes and economic advantages*) from Azerbaijani and Turkish constituencies. However, in cases where such idealism might contradict other interests of Turkey, or not bring worthy dividends in domestic public opinion, such value-based discourse is set aside.

An overarching reality that characterizes Turkey's Caucasus policies over the past decade is that the Caucasus has been *secondary* to the Middle East/North Africa and Europe (the latter also waning since 2005) in Ankara's foreign policy attention and activism.

Numerous reasons explain Ankara's relative neglect of the Caucasus. Internationally, there is a much greater global focus on the upheaval in the Arab world. Domestically, the political team that rose to decision-making positions in Ankara in 2002 did not have a special interest in or links with the Caucasus.

Turkey's initiatives in the Caucasus since 2008 have brought to the fore challenges in the real-life implementation of Turkey's new foreign policy. In recent cases, Turkey has seemed to improvise its actions in the Caucasus, leading observers to question whether it has a well-formulated longer term strategic vision behind its tactical steps or is merely operating on the basis of short-term goals.

Fitful Realization

Turkish diplomats underline that Turkey seeks win-win solutions for all parties in the neighborhood. Neighbors caught up in conflicts or strategic competition with each other have found this approach to contradict their national interests, and render Turkey less of a strategic asset.

One angle in which this disjunction has surfaced has been in the development of Turkey–Russia relations. After the collapse of the USSR, Turkey's value for its 'traditional European allies' was precisely that Turkey, with its pivotal position, could counterbalance Russia and Iran. Turkey's new foreign policy has therefore led to questions about what kind of strategic role Turkey will play. Besides opposition to strategic designs that would irritate Moscow in the Black Sea, Ankara's willingness to embrace Russian energy transit projects—which are widely perceived to be in competition with planned pipelines for bringing non-Russian hydrocarbon resources to Europe—has attracted concerned attention from Europe and the Caucasus.

The Russia–Georgia war highlighted the precarious position of Turkey in light of Russia's growing assertiveness. Ankara maintained a low profile, taking less of a stand against Russia than was expected by Geor-

gia's sympathizers in the West. Turkey's enthusiastic announcement (notably, in Moscow) of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) reflected Ankara's relative detachment from the realities of the region. Though the framework and ideas espoused by the initiative may be appealing in the long term, the practical limitations to making it work today soon became apparent.

The Turkish–Armenian diplomatic overtures of 2009 have also caused controversy in the implementation of Turkey's foreign policy vision in the Caucasus. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan further complicated the historically strained Turkish–Armenian relations, leading Ankara to maintain a closed border and not establish diplomatic relations. The prospect of an open Turkey–Armenia border is supposedly a crucial incentive for Armenia to resolve the Karabakh deadlock. Therefore, the effort to normalize bilateral relations (establish diplomatic relations, open the border, and set up commissions towards developing relations), created rifts in the Turkey–Azerbaijan relationship.

The initiative had significant flaws from the start. Strategically, economically, and in consideration of public opinion, it is not in the interests of the Turkish government to open its border with Armenia given the current status of the Karabakh deadlock. Ankara's ambiguity and contradictory messages about its intentions hurt its credibility both in Yerevan and Baku. Furthermore, rather than gauging and guiding Turkish public opinion from the start, the government allowed public opinion to evolve against the initiative without taking any countermeasures to firm up support. Approximately six months after the normalization process with Armenia had been declared, and amid rising tensions with Baku and reactions from the Turkish public, Turkish decision makers announced that they only intended to follow through with this process if an agreement over Nagorno-Karabakh was reached between Baku and Yerevan. The high-profile initiative was effectively shelved.

This case depicted not only the challenges of implementing the theory of 'zero problems' with neighbors, but also the need for engaging both diplomatic counterparts and the public more openly, factoring in their perspectives from the start and working towards mobilizing their support more effectively. Rather than embarking on initiatives which are unlikely to be carried to fruition, Ankara should lay the foundations for its initiatives more diligently before pre-maturely setting them into motion, and take into consideration the mutual exclusivity of some of its immediate policy goals given the nature of the situation in the Caucasus.

Focusing on the Longer Term

Turkey's high-profile attempts to resolve deadlocks in the Caucasus in the timeframe of 2008–2010 did not work out very well. Meanwhile, Turkey has turned its attention predominately to the Middle East and North Africa. For the near future it is unlikely that Turkey will engage in another high profile attempt to shake up the dynamics in the Caucasus.

However Turkey should in the meantime work on a longer term approach to guiding the Caucasus in a direction which will allow Turkey to inch towards its policy goals of open borders, resolved conflicts, soft power and economic interdependence. In short, Ankara should conceive of *baby steps that will build confidence and influence policy debates* in the Caucasus countries.

The lack of interest in, and cynicism among Turkish mainstream media and regional analysts of Georgia's Rose Revolution and the reforms that followed starkly depicted Turkey's detachment from democratization debates in the region even though advancing good governance principles and open societies in the Caucasus serves Turkey's interests. Ultimately, it was Georgia's Rose revolution reforms that rendered Turkey able to

pursue the policies it thrives on—such as the visa-free regime and free trade agreement with Georgia. Skepticism of Western democracy-promotion initiatives and caution against interfering in internal affairs need not rule out consistent discourse from Ankara along the lines of appreciating and encouraging democratic advancement in the Caucasus.

Consistency in Turkey's own democratization and clearer communication of Turkey's domestic and foreign affairs will also serve to increase its traction in the Caucasus—increasing Turkey's legitimacy, Western credentials and soft power. For example far-reaching, long term initiatives like enshrining new language in schoolbooks about Armenian history in Anatolia or being more cautious about inciting nationalist reactionism with political statements would have more positive effects than high profile, ad hoc reconciliation displays which simply spark Armenian cynicism.

Finally, though good relations with Russia serves Turkey's immediate national interests in various ways, a critical debate within the Turkish intellectual and policy community about the optimal depth and breadth of the alignment between the two countries would be befitting.

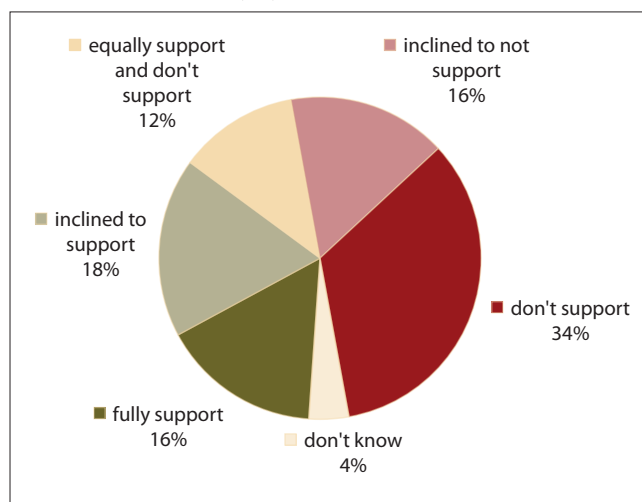
About the Author

Nigar Goksel is the Editor-in-Chief of Turkish Policy Quarterly.

OPINION POLL

Attitudes in Armenia and Georgia Towards Turkey

Figure 1: Support of Armenian Government Opening the Border With Turkey With No Preconditions (%)



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. "Caucasus Barometer 2009 and 2010". Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/>