

REVISITING SECURITY AND ENERGY GEOPOLITICS OF SOUTH CAUCASUS: A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE

Türkiye'nin Güney Kafkasya'nın Güvenliğine ve Enerji Jeopolitiğine Yaklaşımı

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Abstract:

The eastward expansion of the Euro-Atlantic security system came to a halt reaching Russia's bordering neighbors in the Black Sea basin and Kremlin's influence has increased over the South Caucasus in the post-2008 period. This period generated new realities for the security problems emanating from the Nagorno Karabakh dispute and Georgia's breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and led to a relative decline of the Western influence in the region. Under the aegis of Russia, Armenia maintains its invasion over Nagorno Karabakh and surrounding regions, and the Western involvement does not turn into pressure on Yerevan to review its position. Russia's return to the South Caucasus by precluding Nabucco project and initiating the South Stream also added new dimensions to the region's energy geopolitics and paved the way for different projects.

Özet:

Avrupa-Atlantik güvenlik sisteminin doğuya doğru genişlemesi Rusya'nın Karadeniz havzasındaki sınır komşularına ulaşınca duraksamış ve 2008 sonrası dönemde Kremlin'in Güney Kafkasya'daki nüfuzu belirgin biçimde artmıştır. Bu dönem Güney Kafkasya'da Dağlık Karabağ anlaşmazlığında, Gürcistan'ın ayrılıkçı bölgeleri Abhazya ve Güney Osetya sorunlarında yeni gerçeklikler meydana getirmiş, Batılı aktörlerin bölgedeki etkinliğinin nispeten zayıfladığı gözlemlenmiştir. Azerbaycan'a karşı Rusya'nın himayesinde bulunan Ermenistan, Dağlık Karabağ ve çevresindeki işgali sürdürmekte, Batılı ülkelerin bu anlaşmazlık kapsamındaki yaklaşımları

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Erivan'ı tutumunu gözden geçirmeye sevk edebilecek bir baskıya dönüşmemektedir. Rusya'nın bu dönemde Nabucco projesinin gerçekleştirilmesini imkânsız kılması ve Güney Akım projesini başlatması ise Güney Kafkasya'daki enerji jeopolitiğinde farklı açılımlara ve girişimlere zemin hazırlamıştır.

Introduction

The South Caucasus owing to its peculiar setting with small states and larger regional powers has a critical place in Eurasian geopolitics, linking Central Asia and energy-rich Caspian basin to Anatolia and Black Sea basin. The security risks emanating from the unsettled disputes and competition on the transport routes of energy resources in the Caspian basin makes this region a hotspot among the surrounding regional powers and Western states.

The South Caucasus Map



The Armenian invasion of Azerbaijani territories continues to be the major source of conflict and an obstacle to the establishment of lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus. Neither the UN Security Council resolutions nor the Western states' involvement have generated the required pressure on Yerevan to revise its position thanks to the Russia's favorable attitude over Armenia's intransigence. Armenia's budding Talysh policy against Azerbaijan and Yerevan's claims regarding the 1915 events and objectives toward 2015 against Turkey indicate more difficulties at Turkey-Azerbaijan-Armenia relations in the years ahead. The other major security risk is lurking in the conflicts over the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as Russia proceeds to endorse the separatist tendencies in these two territories. Thus, the potential escalation of the tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the possible disintegration of Georgia exist as foremost security risks facing the region.

The energy rivalry taking place mainly between Russia and Western states on the South Caucasus is centered upon the operation and the delivery routes of Caspian oil and gas. In the post-Cold War period, the Western companies have been the dominant investors in the operation and transportation of Azerbaijani oil and gas reserves while Russia endured its influence on Kazakh, Uzbek and Turkmen energy sources. Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline are the three major pipelines carrying Azerbaijani energy to Turkey and international markets without Russian control. With the ongoing competition over the delivery routes of Kazakh oil and Turkmen gas in addition to the Azerbaijani energy sources, the South Caucasus gains prominence in the world energy market.

With Russia's increasing influence over the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and weakening Western involvement, there appears the need to reassess the security risks posed by the conflicts in and energy geopolitics of the region.

1. Russia's Return to the South Caucasus

Having defined the post-Soviet space as its near abroad, Russia has tried to maintain its influence over the South Caucasian states by opposing their integration with the Euro-Atlantic security system and Western-led democratization movements in the

region. Moscow supported the separatist movements in Georgia, continued to back indirectly the Armenian invasion of Azerbaijani territories and positioned itself against the projects to transport Caspian oil and gas to international markets bypassing Russian soil. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia's foreign policy towards the post-Soviet space gained momentum. In 2002, Russia together with Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan established the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a military alliance. The members of the CSTO agreed to open their territories to third parties' military bases only upon the consent of other members and not to join other alliances.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia War symbolized Moscow's return to the region since the war showed that Russia can resort to armed force against the initiatives towards integration of its near abroad with the Euro-Atlantic system. It can be argued that the Saakashvili government's intention to make Georgia a NATO member incited Kremlin's concerns that Russia is being contained the by the Euro-Atlantic security system. Following the campaign against Georgia, Russia set to extend the use of its military bases abroad and the development of its naval capabilities. Moscow and Yerevan agreed to expand the Gumry military base and to prolong the use of the base by Russian army until 2044.¹ Parties also agreed that the Russian army is going to protect the Armenian borders. Through these agreements, Armenia turned into the Moscow's strategic foothold in the South Caucasus and Kremlin demonstrated its purpose to keep the region within the Russian sphere of influence. After recognizing its independence, Russia also began to build a naval base in Abkhazian coast in the Black Sea.²

Russia continued to retort against the expansion of Euro-Atlantic security system by its attitude on the Syria crisis. Russia, despite the possible reaction of its large Muslim population, supported militarily the Assad regime during the crisis and in the Security Council vetoed the draft resolutions including the clauses which might then be used a legal ground for an intervention against the regime. Having concerns to lose its naval base in Tartus, the only Russian base in the Mediterranean, Moscow paid close

¹ Atilla Sandıklı, Elnur İsmayılov and Orhan Gafarlı. *Developments in the Caucasus and Turkey* [in Turkish]. (Istanbul: Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM), 2014), 36.

² "Russia Gains Military Base in Abkhazia," *Radio Free Europe*, February 17, 2010, Accessed April 10, 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Gains_Military_Base_In_Abkhazia/1960545.html.

attention to the means necessary for the Assad regime's survival. Lastly, the case of Crimea demonstrated Kremlin's potential of covertly fueling unrest and occupying the places where there is significant Russian population. Russia's "covert" operations in Ukraine increased worries in Baltic countries and set an example for the rest of the post-Soviet territories including the South Caucasus.

In the post-2008 period, Russia turned into an indispensable actor for the settlement of the disputes in South Caucasus. With its fortified bases in Armenia, Russia continues to be the main security guarantor for Yerevan, though not declared frankly, against Azerbaijan and Turkey. Thanks to its troop presence and unrivalled influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia seems to have the final say over the resolution processes with Georgia. The 2013 presidential elections in Georgia also indicated that Kremlin can shape the domestic politics in this country and has the potential to enable the pro-Russian actors to come to power.

1.1. Russia's Energy Strategy

Russia's strategy is to control the transfer of Caspian energy resources to the international markets. Along with this strategy, Moscow opposes the alternative pipeline projects to transfer the Caspian energy resources through different routes. In this respect, Russia is realizing the South Stream pipeline project to export gas to the European countries through the Black Sea and made the Nabucco project nearly impossible to achieve. European countries including Turkey are fulfilling most of their energy needs from the Russian supply. The European countries' dependency on the Russian energy export is approximately 40 percent. This dependency rate is about 90 percent for some countries in Europe.

Following the death of Nabucco project, the emergence of South Stream and Nord Stream projects are the results of Russia's energy strategy. Moscow is trying to maintain its weight on the EU by supplying the natural gas and to keep the European countries dependent on Russia's hydrocarbon resources. The limited reaction that the European countries gave to Kremlin following the Crimea crisis is the expected outcome of their energy dependency on Russia. At this point it should also be noted that Russia, too, is dependent on European countries to export its energy resources.

However in the short term Moscow enjoys the ability to sanction different European countries since it is not an overnight job to adapt an economy from one energy source to another. German industry is heavily dependent on Russian natural gas and the industry-driven German economy is the locomotive of the EU economy.

1.2. Eurasian Union

The Russian Federation initiated the Customs Union process leading to the establishment of Eurasian Union in order to block the growing Western and Chinese influence in the post-Soviet space. The EU's economic integration attempt with the countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, and China's widening economic sphere of influence into the Central Asia are sources of concern in Moscow. Through the Eurasian Union project, Russia developed an alternative to the EU's Black Sea Synergy and Eastern Partnership Program and planned to erect barriers in Central Asian countries against the Chinese influence. The Eurasian Union project demonstrates that Kremlin is aiming to rule the roost in the post-Soviet territories not just in political aspect but also in economic terms.

Among the countries in the South Caucasus, until present only Armenia declared that it will join the Customs Union and subsequently the Eurasian Union. With this decision Armenia, preferred the deeper integration with the Moscow-led common market to the integration with the EU. It is apparent that the basic motivation behind the Yerevan's decision is to secure its territorial claims against Azerbaijan rather than the expected economic benefits from the Eurasian Union. Having signed the comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, Tbilisi disclosed its decision that Georgia is not planning to join the union. Azerbaijan, without openly rejecting the proposal, pointed out that Baku's priority is integration with the Western institutions and that there is still an ongoing accession process to the World Trade Organization.³

The Eurasian Union is planned to be launched in 2015 with Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia being the present members, and afterwards Kyrgyzstan and

³ Elnur Ismayılov, "Russia's Eurasian Union and Armenia," [in Turkish] *Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM)*, March 23, 2014, Accessed April 20, 2014, <http://www.bilgesam.org/incele/552/-rusyanin-avryasya-birligi-projesi-ve-ermenistan/#.U3DQxigWeZQ>.

Tajikistan are expected to enter the Union. Due to the Crimea crisis with Ukraine, the Eurasian Union's enlargement process seems to continue without Kyiv and thus the Union would not be sizeable enough to be considered as a global actor.⁴ However, it is likely that the Russian Federation will put more pressure on other post-Soviet countries including Georgia and Azerbaijan for their accession to the Union.

2. Western Involvement in the South Caucasus

The US and European Union have endeavored to exert influence in the South Caucasus in the post-Cold War era by engaging in the region in both security and energy realms. The region's proximity to Russian territory emerged as an asset for the US and the projects for alternative energy routes independent of Kremlin's control appeared as opportunities for European countries. Though the integration of the South Caucasus with the Euro-Atlantic security system proved to be more difficult than it seemed, Azerbaijan and Georgia have preserved their Western orientation in order for more independent relations with Russia.

In the post-Soviet South Caucasus, the US has supported the democratization movements and encouraged the establishment of Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) with the participation of Azerbaijan and Georgia alongside Ukraine and Moldova. NATO's Peace for Partnership program included Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and increased the interaction between the alliance and militaries of these countries. Following the September 11 attacks, US claimed that there is "security vacuum" in the Black Sea and attempted to extend the Operation Active Endeavor (deployed in the Mediterranean Sea) into the Black Sea. In 2003, the US together with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan established the Caspian Guard Initiative to ensure the security of oil transportation in the Caspian Sea. With the colored revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and through Romania's and Bulgaria's accession to NATO in 2004 and to EU in 2007, Western influence in Black Sea has become visible.

⁴ Anton Barbashin, "A Eurasian Union No More?," *The National Interest*, April 23, 2014, Accessed May 8, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/eurasian-union-no-more-10296>.

In the Caspian Sea region, the US has supported the projects designed to decrease Europe's dependency on Russian energy supplies. US authorities have opposed the Russian monopoly over the supply of the Caspian energy resources and backed new supply routes (like Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Nabucco) to carry Caspian oil and gas to the European and world markets. US companies have been taking part in oil and gas drilling and production projects in the Caspian basin. Similarly the EU, in order to diversify its energy supplies, has been in search of alternative transfer routes outside the Russian territories. For this reason, the Union supported the BTC and Nabucco projects, and European companies have involved in energy production and transport projects in the Caspian basin.

Western Involvement Waning?

In the post-2008 period, the developments in the South Caucasus are viewed as the indicators for declining Western influence. In contrast to the Russia's increasing weight on the disputes in the region, the US and the EU have abstained from taking action to change the course of events. There are three main reasons that led the observers to think that the Western influence is diminishing. The first one is the immediate result of the war that took place in the summer of 2008. The Russia-Georgia War displayed that the countries in the South Caucasus have no security assurance against Russian aggression. The countries in the region might have had the conviction that integration with the Euro-Atlantic security system is a good way to maintain independence against Russia. In the aftermath of the war in 2008, however, the pro-Western actors in the South Caucasus could have revised this conviction considering that a working collective security system against Russia seems unrealistic.

The second major reason is international community's inability of settling the disputes in the region. Given the existing global and regional balances, UN system solves nothing in the South Caucasus. The UN Security Council resolutions against the Armenia's invasion of Azerbaijani territories have not affected Yerevan's stance and insistence on invasion. Likewise, the OSCE Minsk Group has been ineffective to bring the parties to an agreement. Co-chairmen of the Minsk Group -the US, Russia

and France- do not have the willingness to pressure Armenia to end its occupation even over surrounding regions of Nagorno Karabakh. The ineffectiveness of OSCE compels the Azerbaijani side to seek support or at least neutrality from Moscow, which seems quite unlikely taking the existing close affinity between Russia and Armenia into consideration. For the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the inability of UN system and the OSCE is also evident. Russia, by putting its own peacekeepers on the ground from the early 1990s, has prepared the necessary conditions for the independence of these two breakaway regions. Russia's monopoly in mediation and peacekeeping missions in the region thus makes the UN system impotent and ineffective

The third major reason is the American position on the Nagorno Karabakh dispute. The United States maintains its pro-Armenian stance on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict despite the ongoing Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories and the UN Security Council resolutions against the occupation. The Armenian lobbies in the US shapes Washington's position and leads to a biased perspective among the American policy makers in the Nagorno Karabakh dispute. Baku's support to the Washington's counterterrorism policy in the post-September 11 period and contribution to the Northern Distribution Network in supplies to and from Afghanistan did not change Washington's attitude. The US has continued to prefer Armenian interests over Azerbaijan's legitimate concerns for its territorial integrity. The steady cooperation in energy realm between Baku and Washington, the former's key role in the Southern Corridor projects and contribution to Israel's energy security also have not changed the US policy makers' position on the dispute.

3. Turkey's Position and Concerns

Given its track record in the post-Cold War period, Turkey has had an evolving role in the security and energy rivalry on the Southern Caucasus. Turkey, as a NATO member and having good relations with Russia is progressively more engaged with the region through its strategic relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Although Ankara's initiative to normalize relations with Armenia could not achieve the expected confidence-building in the region and led to a temporary chill between Ankara and Baku, Turkey and Azerbaijan have in a short time recovered their

bilateral sturdy bond and embarked on common projects. Turkey, viewing the Southern Caucasus critical for its national security, supports the independence of countries in the region, preservation of their territorial integrity and favors the peaceful resolution of the protracted conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

With the weakening Western involvement in and Russia's return to the South Caucasus, Turkey might both encounter challenges and have opportunities in its quest for settling the region's disputes. Russia is currently the dominant power in the region and without Kremlin's consent it seems quite difficult to set the stage for lasting solutions to these conflicts. However, it is also manifest that the survival of Abkhazia and South Ossetia highly depends on Moscow and apart from a few countries alongside Russia no state or international organization recognized the independence of these entities. The gradually increasing tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia is not sustainable, and Armenia's dependency on Russia cannot last forever. These conflicts require an eventual reconciliation.

Turkey, utilizing its positive relations with conflicting parties has the potential to mediate in Georgia's breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Ankara is in favor of Georgia's territorial integrity and also good ties especially with Abkhazia. There are doubts whether it is going to be fruitful to take new steps towards Turkish-Armenian normalization after the experience in 2009. Turkish-Armenian relations can only be normalized in parallel to the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh dispute. However, Armenia has no future plan to withdraw from the occupied territories and give up the claims regarding the 1915 events against Turkey. Instead, Armenia and Iran are fueling Talysh separatism⁵ in order to create a new ethnic problem for Azerbaijan. Armenia alongside the diaspora in Americas and Europe are presenting the 1915 events as genocide to receive compensation in the short term and in the long term to gain territory from Turkey. The irredentist discourses⁶ used by Armenian

⁵ Mehmet Fatih Öztarsu, "Why Does Iran Fueling Ethnic Tension?," [in Turkish] May 16, 2013, Accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.fatihoztarsu.com/iran-etnik-catismayi-neden-korukluyor.html>.

⁶ "Sargsyan: We captured the Nagorno Karabakh and it is your duty to seize the Mount Ararat," [in Turkish] *EurActiv*, July 26, 2011, Accessed 23 April, 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com.tr/yazici-sayfasi/article/sarkisyan-karabagi-biz-aldik-agriyi-almak-size-kaldi-020027>.

authorities might sound romantic at the moment but these discourses indicate the tendency for future national goals.

Turkey's another security concern in the South Caucasus might be the PKK/KCK's activities in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. Cooperated extensively with the ASALA in training, international networking and weapons procurement in the past, the PKK/KCK terrorist organization has been mainly engaged in fund-raising activities in Armenia by operating under the guise of seemingly civilian institutions, associations and foundations. Certain Armenian political parties such as *Dashnaksutyun* (Armenian Revolutionary Federation- ARF) are known to have links with the PKK/KCK. The terrorist PKK/KCK using Kurdish nationalist narratives also indoctrinate and recruit Yezidis in Armenia through the networks formed around the institutions such as Kurdish Cultural Center in Yerevan.⁷

Regarding the energy field, Turkey's position promises a better picture. Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia have developed a strategic partnership in energy realm through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline projects. Turkey's main strategy is to be an energy hub for the transport of Caspian oil and gas resources to Europe and international markets. For this strategy, it is in Turkey's interests to support peace and stability in the Caspian basin and the South Caucasus for the safety of energy routes in the region. Turkey, alongside the Western states, supports the diversification of energy routes to carry the Caspian resources to the outside markets. Turkish authorities avoided direct confrontation with Russia in South Stream and Nabucco projects and maintained its good relations with Moscow. Turkey however initiated the construction of an alternative pipeline project -Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP)- to import and transfer the Azerbaijani natural gas to Europe. The TANAP project is a good model on how to manage the divergent interests with Russia in spite of the rivalry on transport routes of Caspian energy resources.

⁷ "PKK Failed in Armenia," Interview with Alexander Murinson by Mehmet Fatih Öztarsu, *Strategic Outlook*, July 11, 2012, Accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.strategicoutlook.org/interviews/news-pkk-failed-in-armenia.html>.

Kazakhstan's oil reserves and Turkmenistan's natural gas reserves are expected to be the main reasons for competition during the course of the New Great Game around the Caspian basin. The transport routes for these energy reserves are critical at both regional and global stage. Kremlin's purpose is to maintain Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's dependency on Russia for exporting their energy resources to international markets. Iran is aiming to have the pipelines carrying Caspian oil and gas to western markets pass through its territories. The decreasing hostility and burgeoning normalization between the US and Iran might bring about new opportunities for Tehran to achieve its ambitions in the Caspian basin. China in accordance with its own energy needs turns towards these two countries alongside Uzbekistan and makes agreements for new pipelines transporting oil and gas across the Central Asia. Even India and Pakistan develop projects to bring Turkmen gas to the south through Afghanistan. And Turkey, in line with its strategy of being an energy hub in the region, newly involves in the competition for the transport of Turkmen gas to Anatolia and Europe. The best way for Turkmen gas seems the underneath of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey route if Baku and Ashgabat resolve their bilateral problems.

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