

Turkey's Strategic Alliances and the Future of Turkish-Armenian Relations

Turkey as a model of moderate Islam?

The geopolitical situation has forced a number of realities on regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. The Iraq conflict has been one of the key aspects in the regional crisis, due to Turkey's strategic importance and its close relationship with the "other" Turkic state, namely Azerbaijan. There is, however, growing anti-Americanism among the Turkish population, in part the result of anger over the Iraqi situation and growing concern about the Kurdish "problem". Iraq can therefore be considered to be a disaster in Turkish-U.S relations, especially with regards to Turkey's refusal to open a northern front, in part due to the lack of a clear post-war plan. Good relations between the U.S forces and Iraqi Kurds has fueled a wave of nationalism in Turkey, one that is a big threat to the Westernization of the country and its image as a secular state, and by extension to its hopes for entrance into the EU. As such, the U.S with its ambitions in the Middle East has become a national security threat for Kemalist Turkey, and a factor in the possible destruction of the "model of moderate Islam" that the U.S has been presenting to the world as proof of its "good intentions" towards Muslims.

Turkey's alternative strategic alliances: a dubious future for the region?

Arguments are made that Turkey is a democracy, albeit not a liberal one at that. This claim, however, fails to take into consideration Turkey's attitude towards and treatment of the Kurds, which places Turkey well outside of the realm of democracy. As such, Turkey's hopes for accession to the EU should not rest on the so-called concessions it has made on the Northern Cyprus issue by accepting a referendum on the Annan Plan. The results of this referendum have frustrated the Turkish public and the government because Northern Cyprus' efforts at the resolution of the conflict were not rewarded. Thus, the perception in Turkey with regards to EU politics is one of "no matter what we do they will keep asking for more". As a result, there is a growing sense of pessimism about the West's intentions in its relations with Turkey, the U.S being one of the entities that are currently under this spotlight. As a result, authoritarianism is becoming the way out of this dilemma, with minorities and minority issues being the key losers. This vicious cycle of frustration—increasing nationalism—more frustration has, it is argued, cooled down the Turkish-American relations and is paving the way for alternative strategic alliances, particularly with Russia.

Turkish nationalism versus Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia: the final countdown

The question then is, how will the allegedly increasing Turkish nationalism impact the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as relations between Turkey and the Republic of Armenia, and what steps should be taken to direct the course of Turkish foreign policy in order to avoid a region-wide clash? A suggestion is made wherein Armenia should take confidence-building measures by indefinitely postponing the push for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, as

well as widely spreading its pro-Turkish stance regarding accession to the EU, with the long-term vision of better relations between the two countries, as well as a possible – although not guaranteed – recognition of the Armenian Genocide by a "wealthier, more stable" Turkey. Many of these suggestions, however, are unrealistic, given that there are no guarantees that the promises would be respected. Turkey's continuous political involvement in the Karabakh conflict through its blockade does not give one the impression that it is interested in playing the role of the honest broker or establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia. If Turkey wishes to maintain its current position on the Karabakh issue and furthermore demand that Armenia take certain steps in that direction, it should abandon its claims of being a neutral, objective country that is not interested in perpetuating conflicts, and by extension its hopes for EU membership. From the other hand Turkey needs to save its face if it wishes to change its policy towards NK issue. Returning to the Turkish-Armenian relations, Armenians must also realize that any possibility for good relations with their Turkish neighbors rests also on their attitudes and policies.

Is there a solution, or just a deadlock?

Given the above-mentioned facts, any real change in the political scene between Turkey and Armenia would require solid steps and changes on both sides, in order to create an environment of confidence conducive to dialogue between the two countries. It is clear that if Turkey wants to become closer to the EU and wants to see less resistance from Armenian EU citizens it needs to change its foreign policy on the Karabakh conflict and possibly also the Armenian Genocide, but what can, or rather what *should* Armenia do? The principle issues that are within Armenia's direct reach can be summarized as follows:

- Introducing soft power tools in Armenia's foreign policy arsenal in order to make it possible to pursue diplomatic relations with Turkey void of accusations of entertaining hidden agendas;
- Shifting from a policy of "pressure" to a more flexible and principle/criteria based foreign policy regarding Turkey. Armenia hasn't yet articulated its desire on what kind of Turkey it wants to see;
- Making Armenia's interest in Turkey's EU accession more sound and reasonable coherent to the interests of Armenian Diaspora and Turkish citizens;
- Starting initiatives for the purpose of untangling current interlocked positions of Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the blockade of Armenia. It should be made clear that Armenia wants to see Turkey as a member of the EU but not at the cost of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, in addition, Turkey should not become EU member at the cost of its ally Azerbaijan.

These points are only the first step in the long road to developing better ties between the two countries and the two peoples. As the process moves along, much more will be required of both sides. However, there is an urgent need to take these steps in the near future, to get rid of the wave of extremism that is a major threat to the stability and welfare of both countries as well as the region.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion on "South Caucasus: Regional, Political and Economic/Business Issues", which took place on July 19, 2005. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, entrepreneurs, and representatives of the international organizations.

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