

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: WHERE THE US AND TURKEY SUCCEEDED TOGETHER

As Americans and Turks discuss the ups and downs in their relationship, the strategically important South Caucasus is one area, where, working together, Turkey and the United States have helped bring about historic changes. More can be done to realize the region's promise should the US and Turkey deepen their partnership with Azerbaijan and Georgia and build on the policies that have proven to be successful. This success has been based on forward-looking pragmatism and recognition of common interests. Acknowledging the achievements in the South Caucasus and learning from them can contribute to future progress in the US-Turkey relationship.

Elin Suleymanov*

* Elin Suleymanov is Senior Counselor with the Government of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions are his own and do not imply an endorsement by the employer.

Formerly a Soviet backyard, the South Caucasus is increasingly emerging as a vital part of the extended European space. Sandwiched between the Black and the Caspian seas, the Caucasus also stands as a key juncture of Eurasia. Living up to its historic reputation, the South Caucasus, especially the Republic of Azerbaijan, is now literally at the crossroads of the East-West and North – South transport corridors. Additionally, the Caucasus has been included concurrently into a rather vague “European Neighborhood” and an even vaguer “Greater Middle East.” This represents both the world’s growing realization of the region’s importance and the lack of a clear immediate plan to address the rising significance of the Caucasus.

Not that the Caucasus has lacked visionaries. On the contrary, it was the vision and pragmatism of Azerbaijan’s late leader Heydar Aliyev, Turkey’s late President Turgut Özal and his successor Süleyman Demirel, and Georgia’s former President Eduard Shevardnadze as well as the strong support of the United States that brought about historic changes to the region. In fact, that vision soon exceeded the bounds of energy cooperation which it had been initially based on. It may also have exceeded the cautious expectations of observing European countries.

The promise and potential of the South Caucasus region are best realized when the nations of the region work in close partnership with Turkey, the United States and the European nations. As the experience of the past decade shows, a strong alliance between Turkey and the United States can be an effective external presence in transforming the present and shaping the future of the Caucasus. Without such cooperative arrangements, the transformation would not have been so successful and wide reaching. The same holds true for its future progress. This experience has also demonstrated that both Turkey and the United States, along with Europe, are most welcome external players, at least in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Symbolically, in the megacity of Istanbul, a hub and gateway for all of Eurasia, visitors from the region find themselves in a comfortable and familiar environment that includes characteristics of their own culture, in contrast to the distant beauty of Europe’s other urban centers.

With the Caucasus gradually more integrated into the Euro-Atlantic space, the role of Turkey, once the only NATO member in the neighborhood, as the main conduit of Western influence may be perceived as declining. The US focus on Iraq and Turkey’s changing internal dynamics, which shifted focus away from the Caucasus, has served only to reinforce this perception. Certainly, the realities of the region have changed as well. Azerbaijan stands firmly on its own feet and Georgia is working hard to solidify its statehood. Calls to engage neighbors in more than perpetual hostility are now heard in Armenia; Europe’s profile has increased; the re-emerging Russia’s presence, although at times still excessive, is becoming more positive and less confrontational and Iran’s Defense Minister, in contrast to the days when he used to order his Navy to point guns at civilian Azerbaijani vessels, pontificates on cooperation.

Far from decreasing US and Turkish prospects in the region, these new realities open much greater opportunities for expanding their presence. That is if both the US and Turkey engage in deeper, more complex and multifaceted relations with the Caucasian states, which go beyond the existing cooperation in energy and security areas. As the realities on the ground change, so should the perceptions in Ankara and Washington. As the new realities were built by the efforts of the previous decade, this expanded involvement should build on the kind of policies that have a successful track record.

For instance, the nearly completed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines not only provide a major access to Caspian hydrocarbons and lay the foundation for the East – West

transportation corridor, but they also put Turkey firmly on the world's map as an important transit hub for energy resources. The East-West corridor served the United States' interests well because it was looking for security partners along Eurasia's southern rim. Notably, Turkey's ongoing security and defense cooperation with the Eurasian nations provided the necessary seeds of interoperability. Certainly, a more comprehensive view of strategic interests requires expanding and deepening regional engagement in all spheres by Turkey and the United States alike. Greater cooperation in spreading information technologies, working together to utilize the comprehensive opportunities provided by the TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) project, helping to develop basic elements of a single information space, significantly boosting educational and professional exchanges, enhanced productive support for civil society and economic reforms, are but a few examples of the most obvious possibilities to explore.

While Turkey's general vision with regard to the region, championed by Özal and Demirel, has been a sound one, Ankara's actions were not always consistent with this vision. The domestic debate sometimes led to a zigzagging regional policy. Either because of stronger conviction or simply out of necessity, Turkey's partners in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia, seemed more consistent. In spite of the overall strong commitment to the region, the United States, too, acted erratically at times. Most notable has been the juggling of requirements to appease domestic pressure from the ethnic Armenian lobby and advancing America's strategic interests through cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey. In fact, if there is popular frustration with and disappointment in the United States, one need not look farther than the lack of progress in the Armenia - Azerbaijan conflict and inconsistencies of the US approach. The waived and yet to be repealed Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act¹ enacted by Congress in 1992 is among the most obvious examples of Washington's self-inflicted hindrances.

Similar to the pattern of close and direct partnerships enjoyed by both Central and Eastern European countries with United States, at some point Baku and Tbilisi developed strong bilateral relationships with Washington and rather than diminishing Turkey's role, this, in fact, strengthened its regional presence. Baku and Tbilisi are traditional advocates of Ankara's stronger Caucasian engagement. Azerbaijan and Georgia, the acknowledged leaders of Euro-Atlantic integration in the post-Soviet space, can now make this case directly to their Western partners.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by the European experience, the continent's security, stability and prosperity can only be achieved through a comprehensive Transatlantic relationship encompassing Western and Eastern European nations alike. For true European security, Western Europe must be an integral part even though the US relies more on Eastern Europeans for certain specific issues. The long - term security and stability of the Black Sea - Caspian region, too, very much depends on US - backed Turkish leadership as a key part of the regional architecture. Even if the US builds direct links to the Caucasus, Turkey is essential for solid regional security. Incidentally, a proposal for the South Caucasus Stability Pact, which would reinforce the basis for such architecture, was voiced by Presidents Aliyev, Demirel and Shevardnadze at the 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul. Had the proposal received a warmer welcome from the region's external partners, the decisions of the 1999 OSCE Summit would have been implemented in a timely manner, ensuring security and development in the South Caucasus.

¹ Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which banned US assistance to the government of Azerbaijan, was enacted by Congress in 1992 under pressure from the Armenian lobby. Opposed by the Clinton and both Bush Administrations as counterproductive, it was waived by President George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11.

Turkey's shifting focus, both regarding the Middle East and the EU, in different ways, reflects its search for a major foreign policy success. Strangely, the success-hunters these days do not frequently mention the very obvious area, where Turkish efforts have worked out rather well - the South Caucasus. Whether it is no longer fashionable to speak of the oft-repeated examples of the Caspian pipelines or whether there is a certain reluctance to accept that the Caspian project has been the most successful, one does not often hear recognition of this positive development.

If in the early 1990's, Ankara and Washington saw the much trumpeted "Turkish Model" as the panacea for the Turkic nations of Eurasia. Today there is a rush to discard the "model" as a failure. Both conclusions, apparently, require more caution, because in areas as complex as the Caucasus and Central Asia any simplistic, black-and-white approach, is not likely to work. The early promoters of the "Turkish Model" did not consider that, while intimately bound to Turkey by language, culture and such major blocks of identity, the recent historical experience of the emerging nations of Eurasia has been dramatically different from Turkey and has a distinct socio-political dynamic.

To the extent that the notion of 'model' means following the exact blueprint, this would never have produced the desired result. However, if regarding Turkey as a model means learning from Turkey's experiences and incorporating lessons from its struggles, as well as adapting the most efficient and successful elements of the existing Turkish system, then the "model" has generally been successful in the region. The ongoing dialogue with Brussels can prove especially helpful in this respect. In addition, those who rush to declare 'failure' are forgetting that, as trivial as it sounds, political and social processes take time.

The "Turkish Model" has succeeded also in another way and that is by setting an example as a strong and yet supportive, constructive major player genuinely seeking the stability, security and prosperity of its neighbors. Such a neighborly presence has been important over the last decade because the region's current political systems and practices emerged in the turmoil of a collapsing superpower and have been deeply affected by this. If in the Baltic States, home to another troika of former Soviet republics, the surrounding environment of established European civil societies helped to mitigate the negative consequences of the post-Soviet transition to sustainable independence, in the Caucasus the externalities mostly acted to make the transition harder. It should be noted that Turkish success in the Caucasus is built on the recognition that she is a positive contributor to the regional dynamic. This is not about taking sides but rather about promoting a secure, integrated and prosperous Caucasus, where citizens are motivated by a vision of the future rather than by fears of the past.

Turkey's cultural and linguistic closeness to Azerbaijan establishes a solid basis for a welcome Turkish presence in the Caucasus. Yet, it is a gross oversimplification to see this fraternal partnership only in cultural terms. Rather, the Azerbaijani-Turkish partnership is based on common interests. However, many Azerbaijanis still mistakenly think that there is no need to work as hard on making their case to Turkey because the two nations are so close, and among the Turks, the cultural affinity argument often championed by a specific part of the Turkish political spectrum, at times, dominates and obscures the vision of the vital national interests in the region. The intimate partnership Turkey and Azerbaijan share with Georgia, a non-Turkic, non-Muslim nation, is based on similar interests. Taking the risk of using another cliché, one can safely argue that at the end of the day, Turkey has developed its Caucasian partnerships with national and regional interests in mind, rather than with an outburst of ethnic emotions.

Such interest-based partnerships are vital for the development and security of Eurasia as a whole, a major objective of the US regional strategy. Hence, one must exercise caution in offering Turkey as a model for the Arab nations of the Middle East. Secular, modern and democratic, Turkey is indeed an example to follow. Nevertheless, the potential for being an example cannot be based solely on the Islamic aspect of Turkish identity. Overemphasizing Turkism as the sole basis for Turkey being a model in Eurasia was to a certain extent counterproductive, as will be the case with any other mono-dimensional model. Rather, Turkey and her neighbors should work to identify common interests. With so many layers of identity, including European and Middle Eastern ones, Turkey is uniquely suited to the role of communicator between cultural entities. Speaking of models, Ankara's insistent knocking on Europe's door provides a test as to whether the EU's own model is tolerant enough to actually allow diversity or is inherently inward looking. The US interest in this case is clear and has been pursued with admirable consistency.

Inevitably, the success of US-support and Turkey's regional role combined with the failures of Moscow's initial abrasive hardball policy in the Caucasus led to growing pragmatism in Kremlin. Even if still suspicious, Russia progressed from seeing Turkey in antagonistic terms to contemplating the benefits of becoming regional partners. Interestingly, Turkey has been open for a partnership with Russia all along, waiting for Moscow to overcome the illusions of a teenage post-imperial independence. Ankara's pragmatic and constructive partnership with Moscow is helpful for the United States and is important for the South Caucasian states. Turkey's developing relationship with Russia strengthens Ankara's regional role and should compliment, not detract from its relations with Washington. Indeed, should Turkey manage to constructively combine its American and emerging Russian foreign policy dimensions, this too will serve US interests in the region.

With this as the backdrop, it is clear that one nation of the South Caucasus, Armenia, is missing the train of regional development and integration. Described recently by the Russian Parliamentary Speaker Boris Gryzlov as "Russia's outpost in the Caucasus," Armenia seems to defend the archaic policies of Moscow, a relic of past centuries, more than the increasingly pragmatic Kremlin does itself. Although the three nations of the South Caucasus have much in common, differences in approach are rather significant for members of the same, small geographic neighborhood. This is due, in part, to different historical experiences; however, no less important are the choices each has made since achieving formal independence in 1991 and in the immediately preceding years. Therefore, while history is important, the situation in the region today is a product of contemporary decision-making in the three regional capitals, as well as a result of influences by the relevant external actors.

Already in the early 1990s with Presidents Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze coming to power in Azerbaijan and Georgia, respectively, following a brief nationalist interlude, pragmatism became a trademark policy for Baku and Tbilisi. The shift to pragmatic politics was, arguably, a crucial and defining point for the Caucasus. The Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey partnership backed by the United States forced the world to look at the Caucasus in a new different way. In spite of all the challenges, the area was no longer known solely for bloody conflicts and incompetent leaders.

Today, young, reform-minded leaders lead the two nations. Azerbaijan has recently become a pilot nation with regard to the implementation of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a revolutionary international mechanism to monitor oil revenues, and the development led by the energy sector is spreading to other sectors of the economy as well. Characteristically, Azerbaijan and Georgia kept out of the Moscow-led joint CIS condemnation of OSCE's democratization field

work in the post-Soviet space. Unlike their neighbor Armenia and number of other CIS member states, who rushed to congratulate the former Ukrainian PM Yanukovich on his alleged election victory, Azerbaijan and Georgia understood that the people of Ukraine needed to choose their leadership in a legitimate democratic process. Helping to deepen and solidify the already strong relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia, a key to Eurasia's promise, is undoubtedly in the interests of Europe, Turkey and United States.

Just as such pragmatism allowed Azerbaijan and Georgia to move ahead with rebuilding the Caucasus when the active phase of warfare was over, it seems that the failure of pragmatist forces in Armenia has kept the country self-contained and relatively isolated in the region. Yerevan's approach to national security is more reflective of ideology than of a realistic assessment of the regional situation. Armenia has significantly exaggerated the threat posed by neighboring Turkey and has become excessively dependent on Russia. Although predictable, the dynamic of Armenia's self-imposed dependency could have been different if Yerevan had a more realistic attitude to Armenia's own needs and the realities faced by an emerging state in a complex and interdependent region. After the assassination, in October of 1999, of the parliamentary speaker Karen Demirchian, along with another popular politician, Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, political pragmatism in Yerevan, which was already badly injured in the past by the forced resignation of former President Ter-Petrosyan, was in a comatose state.

Calls for normalization between Turkey and Armenia are frequently heard these days. However, Armenia's isolation is self-imposed. The Armenian ideologues are simply living in a different century from the rest of the Caucasus, a charge which is also frequently leveled against Yerevan's close strategic partner, Iran. By urging Turkey to open its border with Armenia unilaterally and without any even symbolically constructive mutual steps, Ankara's American and European partners are, in fact, asking it to appease a highly nationalistic, militant regime in a country, which openly occupies its neighbor, conducts ethnic cleansing and stands in violation of international norms as well as several UN Security Council resolutions. Is this a precedent which should be encouraged in Eurasia?

As Turkey is coming under increasing pressure motivated by domestic political lobbying in Western nations, it is worth remembering that, contrary to propaganda-induced clichés, the complexity of the Caucasus is manifested, among other things, through Europe insisting on bending the very European basic norms of coexistence and Turkey, actually, acting very "European" in its defense of such norms. Also disturbing is that instead of allowing historians to study the past, many Europeans and some in the United States use the issue of the tragic events of 1915 as leverage against Turkey. Sadly, both the Armenian Diaspora and its friends around the world are less interested in helping to bring about a just and fair solution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which would truly benefit the entire region, including Armenia. This would, of course, require thinking about the future of the Armenian people rather than just their myths of the past, which has so far proved to be an insurmountable challenge for the Diaspora.

Therefore, Turkey's engagement with Armenia can be productive only should Yerevan choose to move from a paradigm based on hostility towards one of integration with its neighbors. Should Turkey choose a superficial approach of condoning aggression this would only strengthen the nationalists in power in Armenia and remove Yerevan's major incentive for peace. Although, it is true that the South Caucasus is not likely to fully realize its potential with Armenia as an "absentee Caucasian nation," the ball is in Armenia's court.

Both Azerbaijan and Georgia have benefited from the joint US-Turkey approach to the South Caucasus and have risen to meet the challenge of the new century. In turn, the United States has established an important presence in the region and Turkey leads a strong partnership in the South Caucasus. The future of this success depends on deepening direct bilateral ties between the Eurasian nations and the United States, as well as Turkey's realization that it is a major Caucasian player, in spite of its European obsession and sudden upsurges of the Middle Eastern dimension of its identity. Conversely, with the competing influences of other regional powers growing in Eurasia, lack of vitality of the Turkish-American alliance and sufficient commitment of neither Turkey nor the US to commit to the region fully on a unilateral basis are hardly conducive for advancing either US or Turkish interests.

Symbols, however, should not be forgotten in the region. We were reminded of that as Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer accompanied by Prime Minister Erdoğan and top military brass walked along with President Ilham Aliyev at the funeral of the veteran leader Heydar Aliyev in December 2003. Also present were the presidents of Georgia, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine, as well as leading figures from Iran, France and other nations. The absence of a sufficiently high-ranking American delegation at the funeral of Heydar Aliyev, who made pro-Western orientation a cornerstone of his presidency and turned Azerbaijan into one of America's most reliable partners, passing away in a Mid-Western hospital, did not pass unnoticed. It was reminiscent of the American President's conspicuous absence a decade earlier at the funeral of Turkey's Turgut Özal, a friend and a staunch ally, who was instrumental in helping the US with the Gulf War.

Still, the newly established joint foreign ministry initiative, the US-Turkish bilateral group on Eurasia, would do well to remind both Ankara and Washington, that however distracted the two capitals may be by other issues and however emotional they may be due to the ups and downs in their relationship, cooperation in the South Caucasus is one US-Turkish cooperative model that has been a true success.