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## **RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS AND SECURITY ISSUES IN THE CAUCASUS**

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*The views and opinions expressed in this Paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.*

## Russia and Turkey: From Contradictions to Confrontation

Last year's incident with the Russian Su-24 jet instantly changed the very nature of Russia-Turkey relations. What used to be viewed by the leaders of the two countries as a strategic partnership was replaced with harsh confrontation. Moscow's relations with Ankara which recently have been viewed as an exemplary of the transition by the two Eurasian majors from a long-standing competitive and geopolitical rivalry to an example of successful cooperation have made things look worse.

However, the tragic incident that took place on November 24, 2015 did not reveal any new contradictions between the two countries. In fact, back in 2009 when the relations between Russia and Turkey enjoyed positive momentum and passed the test of a five-day Caucasus war, Turkish expert Bülent Aras described them as a "competitive rivalry," predicting a "promising, yet difficult" future for Russia-Turkey relations.<sup>1</sup>

Progress on the economic direction<sup>2</sup> could not obfuscate the differences between Moscow and Ankara with respect to the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, the Cyprus issue and the Transcaucasian energy industry. The Arab Spring and the military conflict in Syria elicited serious contractions between the two powers regarding the future of the Middle East. Russia and Turkey did not see the Syrian settlement through the same lens. For Moscow, the main threat was the strengthening of radical jihadist groups and the collapse of the central government, both of which would create risks for Russia and its neighboring post-Soviet countries. At the same time, Ankara, on the one hand, was looking for opportunities to strengthen its standing as a regional superpower in the Middle East, and while on the other hand to contain any aspirations of the Kurds to self-determination. In 2014, the abovementioned differences were supplemented by disagreement on the status of Crimea. Although Ankara did not join its NATO partners in imposing sanctions against Russia it did not shy away from taking a clear stand on the issue. Pavel Shlykov and Natalia Ulchenko were right to say that the issue of Crimea and Ukraine and the way it was presented to the public and political discourse were to a large extent artificial.<sup>3</sup>

This goes to say that the November 2015 incident has taken old-standing issues and contradictions to a new level. What it showed was that against the backdrop of foreign policy differences even effective economic cooperation cannot ensure stability in interstate relations, while the critical rhetoric regarding the US coming from the Turkish establishment does not mean that its broader views coincide with that of its Russian partners.

<sup>1</sup> Aras, Bülent, "Turkey and the Russian Federation: An Emerging Multidimensional Partnership", *Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, Policy Brief No. 35, August 2009. P. 9–12.*

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of this confrontation, Russia accounted for two thirds of Turkey's natural gas imports, and Turkey was the second most popular travel destination for Russian tour operators, trailing only Egypt with some 3 million Russian tourists visiting the country in 2014. For more details see Skalamera, Morena, "A Kink In the Pipeline. Why Turkish-Russian Gas Diplomacy Won't End Well for Ankara", October 11, 2015; available from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-10-11/kink-pipelin>; Movchan, Andrei, "How will sanctions against Turkey affect Russia", November 30, 2015; available from <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2015/12/22/ru-62340/imfq>.

<sup>3</sup> Шлыков П.В. Ульченко Н.Ю. Динамика российско-турецких отношений в условиях нарастания глобальной нестабильности. М.: Институт востоковедения РАН, 2014. С. 79.

## Greater Caucasus: Risks and Threats Stemming from Syria and Ukraine

Politicians and experts tend to focus on the Middle Eastern dimension of Russian-Turkish relations. But this is not just about Syria. Of no less importance are the processes unfolding in other regions, and primarily in the Greater Caucasus. This perspective has the advantage of shedding light on the possible risks of building up confrontational trends, as well as their limits and opportunities for compromise.

The political situation in the Caucasus has been relegated to the back pages of the news by the developments in the Middle East and Ukraine. However, this region has not lost its strategic importance, even if experts and diplomats are looking elsewhere.

First, unresolved conflicts are still there, and this is especially true for the Nagorno-Karabakh standoff. The number of armed incidents has been on the rise in this region lately, and not only on the line of contact, but also on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan outside the disputed territory.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia looks relatively calm. The two republics, recognized by only a handful of countries, benefit from Russia's military and political guarantees and socioeconomic assistance, while Georgia refrains from any actions to restore its jurisdiction over Sukhum or Tskhinval despite its official perorations about restoring territorial integrity as a top national priority. It should be acknowledged that the situation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia has strengthened Tbilisi's ties with the US, NATO and the EU. Not only did the government formed after the electoral triumph of the Georgian Dream party refuse to review the pro-Western course of Mikhail Saakashvili, but it even strengthened it. South Ossetia's efforts to draw a border with Georgia (also known as the "borderization" strategy) with Moscow's support have caused misgivings in Tbilisi and in the West, raising fears that Russia may be intent on denting into Georgian territory.

Second, South Caucasus is still a matter of geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the US. Although overshadowed by the events in Ukraine, the tensions related to this region remain a matter of concern. Washington's interest in this region is underpinned by the idea of "energy pluralism," i.e. finding alternative ways to supply oil and gas to Europe, as well as a platform for conducting its policy to contain Tehran's and Moscow's ambitions. In Russia, which counts seven North Caucasian republics among its constituent entities, the state of affairs in neighboring countries on the other side of the Greater Caucasus Mountain Range is regarded as a continuation of the domestic agenda, especially when it comes to security issues.

Third, on top of the existing problems so-called background factors play an increasingly important role. This is above all related to the threat emanating from the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> Earlier jihadist groups operating in the Middle East, such as Al-Qaeda,<sup>6</sup> did

<sup>4</sup> On November 12, 2014 Azerbaijan's armed forces downed an Armenian Mi-24 helicopter, killing three crew members. On the night of December 8, 2015, tanks were put into operation on the line of contact. These were the first cases when a military aircraft was downed and tanks used in the conflict zone since May 1994. On the night of April 1, 2016 hostilities intensified along the line of contact in the biggest confrontation in the 22-year truce. November 13, 2014; available at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/252305/>. December 9, 2015; available at <https://lenta.ru/news/2015/12/09/karabakh>. April 2, 2016; available at <http://m.lenta.ru/news/2016/04/02/karabah>.

<sup>5</sup> *Forbidden in Russia.* – Ed. note.

<sup>6</sup> *Forbidden in Russia.* – Ed. note.

not call Caucasus their sphere of interest or a priority region. But IS fighters did just that in the summer of 2014, and today this group has quite a number of fighters of Caucasian origin in its ranks.<sup>7</sup>

With respect to the spillover from the crisis in Ukraine, it has heightened competition between European and Eurasian integration. Part of post-Soviet countries, Georgia included, opted for entering into free trade agreements with the European Union. Others, like Armenia, decided to join the Moscow-backed Eurasian Economic Union, while some try to balance between various integration projects, as is the case with Azerbaijan. All countries involved in ethnic and political conflict view integration as an additional tool for promoting their interests. The crisis in Ukraine has led Georgia and NATO to step up their contacts. Even though Tbilisi was not offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP) that would have paved the way into the Alliance, it received in September 2014 a package enhancing its cooperation with NATO. It didn't take long before a joint training center opened in Krtsanisi in August 2015 with a view of training Georgian officers and military from NATO member and partner countries.<sup>8</sup>

## Turkey in the Caucasus: Traditions, Motives and Interests

Unlike the US or EU countries, Turkey is not a newcomer to Caucasian politics. In the 16th–18th centuries, its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, fought against Persia for domination in the Caucasus, and in 18th–early 20th century against the Russian Empire. Some of today's Southern Caucasus nations were at some point part of this huge empire. However, with the birth of a modern Turkish state in 1923 its elite started to ignore the Caucasus. Inspired by Kemal Ataturk's idea that Islam and imperial heritage lead to backwardness and continues to restrain modernization, the elite looked to Europe (and the US after 1945). As a result, the Caucasus was deemphasized in Turkish foreign policy. During the Cold War Turkey was merely NATO's outpost on the southern border of the Soviet Union, viewed as the “potential enemy” of the West.

Kerim Has, an expert in Eurasian politics at the International Strategic Research Organization (Ankara), was right when he noted that “following the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the regions Turkey discovered after a long period of time was the Caucasus, alongside Central Asia with its close historical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious ties.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For more details see Маркедонов С.М. «Исламское государство»- угроза для Большого Кавказа //9 НОЯБРЯ 2015. [http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id\\_4=6823#top-content](http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=6823#top-content)

<sup>8</sup> «В Грузии открылся военный учебный центр НАТО», 27 августа 2015; <http://www.memo.ru/d/245378.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Хас К. Турция и Азербайджан – не только энергетика, 9 марта 2016; [http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id\\_4=7357#top-content](http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=7357#top-content).

When Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey, it opted for a more proactive and independent policy in the regions used to be part of the "Ottoman space." It was Erdogan who in 2008 came forward after the five-day war with the so-called Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. However, this initiative never really got off the ground due to the opposing interests of regional and external players.

There are several fundamental factors behind Turkey's interest in the Caucasus. First, it has strong ties with Azerbaijan, a Turkic speaking country. Ankara was quick to recognize Azerbaijan as an independent state on December 9, 1991, several days after the signing of the Belavezha Accords. Over the last quarter century this relationship has grown into a strategic alliance. Turkey has been consistently supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and condemning Armenia's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey's military is actively involved in training and retraining Azerbaijan's officers. Since 1993 Turkey has been blocking its 300-kilometer land border with Armenia.

Nevertheless, Ankara officials evaded any direct involvement in the military conflict despite occasional calls by the Turkish public opinion to take a harsher stance against Yerevan and support Azerbaijan more actively. Turkey's diplomacy was to a large extent focused on mobilizing international public opinion against Armenia. A media campaign was also carried out within the country to denounce Armenian authorities and diaspora, accusing them of supporting the PKK, which is viewed as a terrorist group in Turkey.

Azerbaijan and Turkey are involved in a number of energy projects (Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan and Baku – Tbilisi – Erzurum, as well as Trans-Anatolian and Trans-Adriatic natural gas pipelines), as well as in various infrastructure programs, such as the Baku – Akhalkalaki – Tbilisi – Kars railway. While the oil and gas pipeline projects are aimed at creating alternative routes for supplying oil and gas to EU countries, railway construction is intended to further isolate Armenia, which is not a party to the project, from the region by bypassing its territory.

Second, Turkey shares interests with Georgia. Tbilisi wants to be part of NATO, if not as a full-fledged member, which is prevented by unsettled ethnic and territorial conflicts, then at least by enhancing military and political ties with the Alliance. At the same time, Ankara is seeking to garner NATO support as it pursues its regional ambitions. The two countries are also working together on energy pipeline projects. In addition, Turkish businesses were involved in the reconstruction of the Tbilisi and Batumi airports. Bilateral military-technical cooperation (upgrade of the Marneuli airport) and trade should not be forgotten either.

Third, Caucasian diasporas are an important factor. Estimates may vary, but all in all some 10 percent of Turkey's current population have ties with North and South Caucasus. There are 3–5 million people of North Caucasian origin in Turkey, about 3 million people from Azerbaijan and 2 to 3 million people of Georgian descent. There are many public figures and lobbyists among them. Their representatives can be found in the army, parliament, and the media. Together they are a very important constituency. The most influential Caucasian non-government organizations are Kafkas Derneği, Kafkas Vakfı and Birleşik

Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu. There is also a Chechen organization, Çeçen Dayanışma Grubu. Azeri and Georgian diasporas are represented by Azerbaycan Dostluk Derneği and Gürcistan Dostluk Derneği.<sup>10</sup>

Fourth, Turkey's actions in the Caucasus are often interpreted not just as an element of its foreign policy, but also as a part of an effort by the West to expand its regional footprint. The US and its EU allies support the trilateral cooperation between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Jeffrey Mankoff for the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said that the US remains focused on “promoting pluralistic geopolitics and ensuring that Caspian oil and gas can be supplied to Europe. The importance of Caspian energy supplies to Europe may lessen in the next decade or so depending on the developments on the global energy markets, but the US will still support South Caucasian pipeline projects as a way to ensure geopolitical pluralism,” i.e. to minimize Russia's military and political presence in the region.<sup>11</sup> As Fiona Hill, Kemal Kirişci and Andrew Moffatt noted in their the Brookings Institution report from July 2015, “Retracing the Caucasian Circle: Considerations and constraints for U.S., EU, and Turkish engagement in the South Caucasus” Washington and its allies have pulled back from their activist roles in regional affairs, and should re-engage in regional diplomacy. The three authors regard Turkey as being part of the West alongside the EU and the US.<sup>12</sup> A similar view on Turkey's actions in South Caucasus as being part of the Western agenda was expressed by Jos Boonstra, Head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia program at FRIDE think tank, in his working paper titled “The South Caucasus concert: Each playing its own tune,” published in September 2015.<sup>13</sup>

The fifth point is that Armenia has become the most challenging issue for Turkey's foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. Over the last two and a half decades these two countries have tried to reverse this negative momentum more than once without achieving any tangible results. The reconciliation process has been stagnating since the two countries signed two protocols in 2009 on restoring diplomatic relations and normalization. Diplomatic relations have yet to be established and the land border is still locked. What fuels discord between Armenia and Turkey is the interpretation of the tragic events that took place in 1915 in the Ottoman Empire. The strategic cooperation between Moscow and Yerevan does little to ease the tensions. Alongside Russia, Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), while Russia's 102nd military base in Gyumri is located on Armenia's border with Turkey.

<sup>10</sup> Aydin, Mustafa, *Changing Dynamics of Turkish Foreign and Security Policies in the Caucasus // Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus Regional Conflicts and Transformation*, Ashgate Publishing Company. 2011. P. 117–120.

<sup>11</sup> Джеффри Манкофф о кавказских приоритетах США, 2014-10 февраля // <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=21245>.

<sup>12</sup> Hill, Fiona; Kirişci, Kemal and Moffatt, Andrew, “Retracing the Caucasian Circle: Considerations and constraints for U.S., EU, and Turkish engagement in the South Caucasus” 2015, July; available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2015/07/south-caucasus-engagement>.

<sup>13</sup> Boonstra, Jos, “The South Caucasus concert: Each playing its own tune” 2015, September; available at <http://www.cascade-caucasus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/WP-128-ok.pdf>.

## Moscow and Ankara: Regional Trends in the Caucasus

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There were ups and downs in Russian-Turkish relations in the Caucasus over the last quarter century. There were periods of sharp divergences during the military phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1991–1994), as well as during Russia’s counter-separatist campaigns in Chechnya. But there were also periods marked by compromise and recognition of a new status quo in North Caucasus, as was the case in early 2000s, and after 2008 for South Caucasus (overall, it was to Russia’s advantage).

Despite differences with Moscow regarding the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or Georgia’s territorial integrity, Ankara refrained from directly confronting Russia on this issue. In fact, the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and business contacts between Turkish citizens of Abkhaz origin and their ancestral homeland made Ankara’s policy more nuanced. The first and second presidents of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzimba and Sergey Bagashp, visited Turkey more than once during their presidency, which the Turkish authorities could have opposed and prevented. In autumn 2009, prominent Turkish diplomat Unal Cevikoz visited Sukhum, sparking rumors of Ankara’s possible recognition of Abkhazia’s independence.<sup>14</sup> Food and manufactured products from Turkey accounted for 20–25 percent of the Abkhaz market until early 2016. There were other types of contacts between Abkhazia and Turkey, including chartering Turkish fishing boats during the fishing season and exporting coal to Turkey from Tkvarcheli, Abkhazia.

That said the current confrontation between the two countries has elicited potential risks for the Middle East and beyond. According to Polish Orientalist Konrad Zasztowt, “The conflict between Turkey and Russia due to their contradictory interests in the Middle East deepens the division of the South Caucasus into two blocks. As a result, Turkey strengthens its political and economic cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan, while Russia increases military cooperation with Armenia.”<sup>15</sup> But is it fair to say that Russia and Turkey’s interests could come into conflict in the Caucasus?

At first sight, a number of facts tend to prove just that. For instance, in early December 2015, in the aftermath of the incident with the Russian Su-24 jet, Turkey’s Prime Minister Akhmet Davutoglu said that “in order to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and ensure peace in the region the occupied territories of Azerbaijan should be liberated.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Russia strengthened its military presence in Armenia. A list of Russian weapons supplied to the republic was released in February 2016. In January 2016, Abkhazia joined the Russian sanctions against Ankara in keeping with the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Russia. These actions could

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<sup>14</sup> “Will Turkey take up Georgian plan?” February 15, 2010; available at <http://www.georgiatimes.info/en/interview/30711.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Zasztowt, Konrad, “The South Caucasus in the Shadow of the Russian-Turkish Crisis”, February 11, 2016; available at [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=21393](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=21393).

<sup>16</sup> “Davutoglu: Our position on Karabakh is clear and open”, December 3, 2015; available at <http://news.az/articles/karabakh/103245>.

not fail to affect the position of the Turkish leadership regarding Georgia. In fact, it provided a new incentive for Turkey and Georgia to develop their dialogue. It was not a coincidence that a trilateral ministerial meeting in Tbilisi on February 19, 2016 resulted in the signing by the foreign ministers of Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan of a joint declaration saying that territorial integrity is one of the key priorities in terms of ensuring regional security.<sup>17</sup>

When the Nagorno-Karabach conflict escalated in early April 2016, Erdogan supported Baku and expressed condolences to the families of Azeri servicemen who died in the fighting.<sup>18</sup>

However there are also other factors that make it impossible to divide the Caucasus into two blocks, one headed by Russia and the other Turkey. First, the decision by Russia and Armenia to step up their military technical cooperation had the logic of its own. In fact, the decision to this effect was taken before the Su-24 incident. Plans to build a single AMD system in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Caucasus within the CIS were announced back in April 2015. On November 11, 2015 President of Russia Vladimir Putin issued an instruction to draft an agreement with Armenia on creating a unified regional AMD system in North Caucasus. The standoff between Russia and Turkey made these plans even more urgent and relevant, adding to their symbolic meaning. On December 23, 2015 Russian and Armenian Defense Ministers Sergey Shoigu and Seiran Ohanyan signed an agreement on the unified AMD system. It was then that the upgraded military aircraft were delivered to Armenia.

Second, Ankara, Baku and Tbilisi do not share the same political views despite being close on many issues. Azerbaijan has a track record of strained relations with the West, and in recent years the US and the EU have become much more critical of Baku's authoritarian regime. This Caspian nation has long viewed Russia as a counterweight and additional source of legitimacy for the regime in place. Azerbaijan is also interested in economic cooperation with Russia, as well as working together to combat the jihadist threat. The latter point could also be interesting for Georgia, which faces a similar threat in its Pankisi Gorge. It was not a coincidence that both Tbilisi and Baku did not fully identify with Ukrainian authorities, and have adopted a much more nuanced approach to the whole Ukrainian issue that began in early 2014 and continues in 2016. Azerbaijan has also been very cautious on Syria. Just like Russia, it feared the collapse of a secular government in the Middle East and a spillover of jihadist ideas and practices into its territory. As a result, Baku was not ready to align its foreign policy with Turkey's. "Azerbaijan is developing its relations with Turkey, as well as with Russia, and pays special attention to strengthening ties with both countries," Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said in

<sup>17</sup> Главы МИД Азербайджана, Турции и Грузии подписали совместную декларацию/ 19 февраля 2016 года. // <http://haqqin.az/news/63891>

<sup>18</sup> Гордеев В. Эрдоган заявил о поддержке Азербайджана в связи с событиями в Карабахе. 2 апреля 2016 года. // <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/04/2016/56ffe9f69a79477f6ca5b952>

February 2016. He went on to note, however, that his country was neither satisfied with its relations with Moscow, nor with Ankara.<sup>19</sup>

Third, with the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia continues its search for a balance between Armenia, its strategic ally, and Azerbaijan, a strategic partner. Having lost much of its leverage over Georgia after recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in 2008, Moscow cannot afford the luxury of starting a confrontation with Azerbaijan, since Turkish politicians would be eager to jump on this opportunity. In this case, Russia risks facing new complications on the Dagestani track on the top of the existing ones. In December 2015 IS claimed four terrorist attacks in Dagestan. Moreover, a hostile Azerbaijan would mean the formation of an Ankara – Baku – Tbilisi axis against Russia, despite the ongoing disagreements between the three countries.

The fourth point is that Iran should not be excluded from this Caucasian equation. This country has committed itself to an independent foreign policy and is not siding with any centers of power, neither the West, nor Russia. Iran is the only country that has voiced criticism over the Basic Principles for a Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, also known as the Madrid Principles, saying that this and other similar conflicts should be resolved without interference from players outside the region. An “unfrozen” conflict with Turkey possibly siding with Azerbaijan could threaten Tehran’s interests, since this could mean a more active involvement by the US and the EU, including through a peacekeeping operation.

However, Azerbaijan has been clear and consistent in its efforts to normalize relations with Iran. On February 23, 2016, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev visited Tehran and met with its Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. It should be noted that initiatives to this effect have been undertaken despite the differences between Turkey, Azerbaijan’s strategic ally, and Iran regarding Syria and the Middle East in general. Tbilisi also sees potential for developing bilateral relations with Tehran. In fact, Georgia’s Minister of Energy Kakha Kaladze met with Iran’s Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh in February 2016. The normalization of Iran’s relations with the West and the removal of sanctions create new opportunities for Iran in the Caucasus, and all players, including Moscow and Ankara will have to take notice.

The fifth point is that the West, while supporting pluralism in geopolitics and energy, is not interested in a stronger Turkey or its Eurasian ambitions. Back in July 2006, the US House of Representatives passed a decision, to a large extent promoted by the Armenian lobby, guaranteeing that no export or import funds will be used to finance the construction of the Baku – Akhalkalaki – Tbilisi – Kars railway bypassing Armenia. The US legislators have not changed their position on this issue to this day.

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<sup>19</sup> From Э.Мамедъяров: «Такие отношения между Россией и Турцией не устраивают Азербайджан»/ 15 февраля 2016 года // <http://haqqin.az/news/63619>

## Three Scenarios: Between Status Quo and Modus Vivendi

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Therefore, it would be premature to argue that the standoff between Russia and Turkey, mostly related to the Middle East, has split the Caucasus, although this scenario is not impossible. These risks are underpinned by lingering ethnic and political issues and a lack of progress in Russian–Turkish relations.

Three scenarios can be imagined in this respect. The first one is the fight to preserve the current status quo. Russia would hardly want to break the existing status quo in the Caucasus until it resolves the Syrian and Ukrainian issues. This is especially true since the West has de-facto come to terms with the transfer of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia's sphere of influence in exchange for strengthening its positions in Georgia. This divide consolidates the status quo in place since August 2008. The same is not true for Ukraine.

Moreover, the breakdown of the fragile status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh could have very negative consequences for Moscow. If a negative scenario materializes, the very prospects of Eurasian integration projects (CSTO and EEU) would come under threat, since its participants are divided on the issue of military and political support for Armenia. In addition, it would oppose Moscow and Azerbaijan, who are not ready to be in confrontation with each other despite the current crisis in Russia–Turkey relations.

The West will restrain Turkey, which had showed only limited interest in the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia before and after 2015, in its possible attempts to escalate the situation in Karabakh. As of today, the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which hasn't been recognized by anyone, even Armenia, is the only entity in the post-Soviet space receiving real, albeit modest, funding from the US. In the event of Ankara's active and, more importantly, open military involvement in the conflict, the Armenian lobby in the US Congress, as well as in Europe, primarily in France, would become very active. This may not necessarily result in the total freeze in the strategic relations between the US and Turkey, but in any case, it would make it impossible to present the conflict as a proxy war between Russia and the West, as was de facto the case in Ukraine and Georgia. To a large extent, Azerbaijan is not eager to pass from aggressive rhetoric to action for the same reasons, as well as due to the lack of a decisive military advantage over Armenia. Iran also plays a role in containing these tensions, viewing full-fledged military conflict as a threat to its interests.

That said, maintaining the status quo would not mean putting the situation on hold. The conflicting parties could still test one another and the allies backing them (Russia and Turkey). The growing number of incidents on the contact line along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan outside Nagorno-Karabakh adds to the tension. These incidents are also looked upon among other things, as ramifications of the standoff between Moscow and Ankara in the Middle East (even if this is not necessarily the case).

The second scenario is negative. It implies stepping up military activity with the possible escalation of the incidents (shelling, commando raids) into a full-fledged conflict involving third parties, primarily, Russia and Turkey. This algorithm would be possible if the situation gets totally or to a large extent out of control on their respective lines of contact. It is unlikely that Ankara and Moscow would push for this scenario for the reasons mentioned

above. However, they could become hostage to such circumstances if the escalation actually takes place. This is why the April escalation is especially dangerous.

The fallout from giving up on a strategic ally could be too big. Consequently, it seems that the biggest risk is that Russia and Turkey would be unable to prevent the Caucasian status quo from deescalating, and this could pose a threat for both of them. In case of this negative scenario, Moscow and Ankara could be forced to take unilateral action. Their closest allies, CSTO and EEU members for Russia and NATO for Turkey, have no direct interest in interfering into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or contributing to its settlement in the event of a new round of escalation. What seems to prevent this negative scenario from materializing is the fact that both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a vertical power structure. However, political destabilization in both countries, no matter the reason, could change things for the worst.

The third scenario would be to find some kind of a modus vivendi, taking into account that Russia and Turkey are unlikely to improve their relations in the near future. Moreover, since today's confrontation is underpinned by the developments in the Middle East, solutions aimed at normalizing the situation should also be related to the Caucasus region. A successful truce and peace process in Syria could facilitate a rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara or could create prerequisites for ironing out their differences. This could lower the risks in other regions where the two countries have conflicting interests.

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