

Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Is Possible - and Necessary!

By [Muriel Mirak-Weissbach](#)

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The visit by Turkish President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan on September 6 will be remembered as a historic event, even if concrete results are not to be expected immediately. Accepting the invitation by Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, to attend the World Cup qualifying 2010 football match between the two countries' teams, Gul broke a tabu and opened the way for a process of reconciliation to begin, following decades of bitter enmity. If a genuine peace process unfolds, it could not only reestablish normal relations between the two neighbors, but contribute to stabilizing the Caucasus and far beyond.

Such a development would have been difficult to imagine without the crisis that erupted with Georgia's military move against South Ossetia, and the subsequent Russian response. The Russian-Georgian war effected a kaleidoscopic shift in the geostrategic relations among the nations in the region, whereby the relatively small Armenia has acquired a new significance. Several factors have to be taken into consideration to clarify this new reality.

First and foremost, the Georgian-Russian crisis laid bare the extreme vulnerability of Georgia as a transit land for oil and gas deliveries from Azerbaijan to the West. The conflict led to a halt in exports and an evacuation of some expatriate oil workers. As Michael Chossudovsky showed in a recent article (www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=9907), the war had everything to do with oil. Georgia's belligerent attack came on the heels of a U.S.-GUAM summit, which included Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, countries seen as appendages of NATO deployed to militarily protect the U.S.-backed pipelines. U.S. oil policy, as conceived and implemented by Dick Cheney, has been to promote pipelines from Azerbaijan westwards, which would by-pass both Russia and Iran, considered enemy countries. The corollary of this policy has been to sabotage any pipelines involving Russia or Iran, and thwart economic cooperation which includes them as well as China and the Central Asian Republics. As Chossudovsky shows, the Cheney strategy has not met success, as powerful coalitions stretching from Iran across Asia have come into being around concrete economic, political and military cooperation. The Russian response to Mikhail Saakashvili's foolish adventure has thrown a hefty monkey-wrench into the entire Cheney approach.

A second consideration involves the role of Turkey. A NATO member and staunch U.S. ally, Turkey is a key element of the pipeline routes: the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline carries Azeri oil across Georgia and to Turkey's Mediterranean port at Ceyhan. A further extension of the pipeline is envisioned in the Nabucco project across Turkey into Austria via Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary. Gas from Turkmenistan is also being discussed. However, as analyst Andrew Neff from Global Insight put it, "without Azeri gas, the Nabucco pipeline is dead on the drawing board." Azerbaijan's state oil company, SOCAR, decided on August 7 to deliver

oil now through the Baku-Novorossisk pipeline.

Turkey could be seriously damaged by the spin-off effects of the Georgia crisis, not only if the pipeline were blocked, but also if relations with Russia were to deteriorate. Already on Sept. 2, Turkish Daily News reported that Russia had stopped Turkish trucks at customs check-points following the crisis, and some mooted that this was Moscow's way of punishing Ankara for having allowed U.S. warships to pass through the Bosphorus with aid for Georgia. Turkey cannot afford problems with Moscow, as it depends on Russia for 29% of its oil and 63% of its gas. Were these supplies interrupted, Turkey "would be in the dark," as Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan once said. The two countries have a significant trade volume of \$38 billion for the current year, and it is growing.

Turkey's Stability Initiative

It may be as a result of such considerations that the Turkish government of Erdogan launched an intriguing new initiative, known as the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP), which aims to bring together Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Russia. Speaking to the press at a reception given by the General Staff command in Ankara for Victory Day on August 30, Erdogan made the following remarks: "Why did we call this the 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform'? Why is Armenia included in this, why is Georgia included in this? Because we chose [them] for inclusion [in the platform] on a geographic basis. We have to succeed in this so that the region will become a region of welfare and ease." He added: "We need to shape the future of the Caucasus together. It is a time when we need to take brave steps to prevent the regional tension from turning into global turmoil. Channels of dialogue must be kept open."

The CSCP is to be on the agenda of the talks between the presidents of Turkey and Armenia, as indicated in a series of important bilateral meetings among members of the proposed grouping. Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, in a press conference with his Georgian counterpart Eka Tkeshelashvili in Istanbul reported on Sept. 1 by Today's Zaman, said a Turkish delegation going to Yerevan to prepare Gul's visit, would discuss the CSCP. Subsequent reports confirmed that was the case. Erdogan himself discussed the idea on visits to Moscow, Tblisi and Baku. The foreign minister of Azerbaijan addressed the matter in Ankara on August 29, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dealt with it in talks in Istanbul on Sept. 2.

Lavrov expressed outright support for the initiative (www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=114351). While denying that Russian controls on Turkish imports had been politically motivated, Lavrov said his country appreciated Turkey's efforts to stabilize the region, adding that "This initiative [the CSCP] is based on common sense."

On the same day, Armenian President Sargsyan met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Sochi, to discuss new bilateral cooperation projects, and, of course, the Caucasus crisis. Both the Armenian and the Azeri governments have said they would discuss the CSCP proposal.

The Parameters of Cooperation

What the Erdogan government has proposed is ambitious, courageous and most necessary. But it will not be easy to implement. The countries invited to participate in the CSCP are not

at all thinking on the same wave length, nor do they share the same self-perceived geostrategic interests.

Since the “Rose Revolution,” Georgia has been functioning as a plaything of the George Soros-operated networks based in the U.S., and supported by the Bush-Cheney administration, and has been being used as an attack-dog against Moscow, as the recent South Ossetia tragedy showed. Azerbaijan, a Muslim nation, had more or less been in the pocket of Dick Cheney and his oil magnate friends since independence. Azerbaijan is technically still in a state of war against Armenia, since the latter took the Armenian enclave Nagorno-Karabagh and occupied contiguous Azeri territory in the war following independence. Turkey, which was the first to recognize Armenia’s independence in 1991, is, however an ally of Turkic Azerbaijan, and following the Nagorno-Karabagh war, broke off all relations with Yerevan in 1993. This meant closing the borders to Armenia, as Azerbaijan had already done. Armenia has had good relations historically with Georgia, which is also a Christian state, and has very close relations with Russia. Armenia’s economy is deeply integrated with Russia’s: it relies on Russia for oil and gas (though some comes from Iran), for its nuclear fuel, and for financing of its nuclear plant. Russia controls its communications and transportation networks. Russian companies are prospecting for uranium ore in Armenia, and there are plans afoot for constructing another nuclear plant. Russian companies are also the largest foreign investors in the economy, to the tune of \$1.3 billion, in energy, banking, mining, metallurgy, telecommunications, and construction. Historically, Russia has also functioned as the protector of Christian populations and nations.

In the current strategic juncture, Russia could exert its influence in ways that could either help or hurt neighboring countries. Its intervention in Georgia has made clear what pull it has; it could exert pressure on Azerbaijan regarding the Nagorno-Karabagh issue. Considering the precedent of Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent republics, one might entertain the possibility (albeit remote) that Moscow could hint at possible recognition of Nagorno-Karabagh. The official Russian position has embodied the rational approach, that the entire matter must be settled through bilateral negotiations.

In this extremely complicated combination, there are two alternative routes that might be taken: either each nation (with its international sponsor if there is one) seeks to gain its own perceived geostrategic gain, at the expense of others, thus exacerbating the crisis; or each comes to terms with the fact that the game being played in the Caucasus is being manipulated by forces outside the region – the Anglo-American oil interests represented by Cheney et al – whose ultimate aims collide with those of any of the independent nation states of the region, if seen as such.

Thus, the Turkish initiative should be taken up and pursued. Some sources in Turkey have told this author that they are suspicious of the CSCP, and there have been reports in the Turkish press to the same effect. This view says that what is really behind the Erdogan initiative is an operation, coordinated with Washington, aimed at coopting Armenia, via Turkey, in essence, to wean Armenia away from its relationship with Russia. Thus, even the football diplomacy of Gul would be considered a ploy in this game. This author is skeptical of such a reading; initial reports in the Turkish press indicated that Washington was not at all pleased with the CSCP, because a) it does not contemplate the presence of the U.S. or any other nation from the West, and b) the U.S. had not been informed of the idea. Turkish press reports now say that Washington has been informed, and that it reportedly agrees; that may prove to be true, but the fact remains the grouping envisioned in the initiative includes Russia, but not anyone in the West.

Be that as it may, there are certain facts that cannot be denied. First, as a result of its economic interdependence on Russia, Armenia cannot (and would not like to) be turned into an enemy of Moscow overnight. Secondly, the Georgian-Russian war has altered the situation on the ground. It is incumbent upon Turkey at this point to open its borders with Armenia, and Azerbaijan as well.

The Armenian-Turkish Dispute

If there is to be a rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan, a number of other important issues are going to have to be dealt with. The two countries have been at odds, and not only since Turkey closed its borders in 1993. The enmity goes back to 1915, when the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire carried out an extermination policy against the Armenian population, leading to the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million. Although the post-war Turkish government in 1919 put the Young Turk leaders on trial and convicted them; although Ataturk, father of the modern Turkish nation, was not involved; still, no Turkish government has acknowledged charges, brought by Armenians in the diaspora and in Yerevan, that what occurred was a conscious policy of genocide. The official Turkish view is that, in the course of the terrible First World War, Armenians were deported because they were suspected of having been allied with Russia, and that, during the deportations, unfortunately many (and the figures are greatly reduced) perished. This issue has been the thorniest in bilateral relations. The Turkish government proposes that a joint commission of historians from both sides examine the facts to determine what actually occurred. Ankara also demands that the Armenian diaspora cease its international campaigns to recognize the genocide.

Then, there is the issue of Nagorno-Karabagh, which the Russians have wisely proposed be dealt with through negotiations. Finally, Turkey demands that Armenia recognize the current borders between the two nations. Armenia demands recognition of the genocide and calls for reopening diplomatic relations without conditions.

Westphalia Now!

The challenge (and opportunity) posed to the governments and peoples of Turkey and Armenia by the current unique situation is of historic proportions, and, if adequately met, could truly lead to historic breakthroughs. But this will require that both sides “jump over their own shadows,” as the Germans put it. This means, both sides must strive to overcome the bitterness, fears, and, yes, hatred, that the horrendous events of 1915 engendered. As the daughter of orphans of that genocide, this author can totally agree with those Armenians at home and in the diaspora who demand justice be done in finally recognizing the facts of history. At the same time, it must be stressed that, just as those tragic events were ultimately the results of geopolitical manipulations of the Great Powers of the time – unbeknownst to many on the ground –, so today it is circles in the Anglo-American power elite (including Cheney’s oil interests), who are desperately seeking to manipulate nations in the Caucasus to their ends. Thus, the question is: can the nations of the region break free of such geopolitical harnesses, and come together in a regional forum, as potentially embodied in the Turkish proposal, to establish the basis for effective regional stability and security through cooperation?

The approach required for overcoming the Turkish-Armenian conflict is that first embraced at the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. There, following the religious wars in Europe culminating in the Thirty Years War, the former adversaries established peace on the basis of two

fundamental principles: “that each Party shall endeavor to procure the Benefit, Honor and Advantage of the other;” and that on all sides, there should be “a perpetual Oblivion, Amnesty or Pardon of all that has been committed,” i.e. that all atrocities committed must be consigned to the past.

The application of such noble principles to overcoming the Armenian-Turkish conflict today would require acknowledging the historical facts and seeking reconciliation through forgiveness. On the concrete economic plane, it means reopening the borders to Armenia, to allow the flow of goods and persons, to the economic and social benefit of all parties. Turkey would benefit by gaining access to markets in nations of the former Soviet Union, and Armenia would massively increase its trade and GDP, as the Turkish-American Business Development Council has calculated. In addition, Armenia’s rail and road transportation routes from the Soviet era should be revived and modernized, and linked up with those of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Central Asia and so forth. A similar approach should be adopted regarding existing and new gas and oil pipelines.

The solution comes down to a question of political will and courage. Can the political leaders of Armenia and Turkey attain the stature of an Adenauer and a DeGaulle, and seek reconciliation in the interest of the future of their populations? Can they rise above the notion of collective guilt for acts perpetrated by specific political forces almost a century ago, and seek to restore the spirit of cohabitation that existed between the two peoples for centuries before the First World War? If such a breakthrough were to occur, on the heels of Gul’s football diplomacy in Yerevan, it would not only earn statesmen on both sides great honor, but serve as a healthy challenge to so many other, similar conflicts in our troubled world today.

The author can be reached at: mirak.weissbach@googlemail.com

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