

THE GEORGIA CRISIS AND RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS



BY IGOR TORBAKOV

THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

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THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

Published in the United States by

The Jamestown Foundation

1111 16th St. N.W.

Suite 320

Washington, DC 20036

<http://www.jamestown.org>

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Executive Summary

The August 2008 Russia-Georgia war has triggered some major shifts in regional geopolitics. The Caucasus crisis also directly affected the relationship between the two main regional powers – Russia and Turkey. Even before the Georgia war, the relations between Moscow and Ankara were quite complex – combining the elements of large-scale cooperation and subtle competition.

The ambivalent situation which existed in the South Caucasus before August 7 allowed Ankara to pursue a rather ambiguous policy in the region. The main features of this situation were the seemingly “frozen” state of the local conflicts and Russia’s relatively restrained behavior.

On the one hand, Turkey held that its ultimate geopolitical interest lay in the preservation of the “geopolitical pluralism” in post-Soviet Eurasia in general and in the South Caucasus in particular. Politically, maintaining “pluralism” meant the strengthening of the regional countries’ political sovereignty, countering the growth of Russian influence in the Caucasus, and fostering the development of closer ties between the South Caucasus nations and the Euro-Atlantic organizations. Economically, “pluralism” largely meant the construction of multiple oil and gas pipelines traversing the Caucasus transit corridor and bringing Caspian hydrocarbons to the world market while bypassing Russia. Turkey’s strategic goal has been to maximally exploit the economic dimension of the “pluralism” policy in order to transform the country into a major energy transit hub through which Caspian fuel would be transported to Europe and other markets.

On the other hand, Russia has become Turkey’s major trading partner and key energy supplier. The ambiguity of the situation was seen as beneficial for Turkey’s delicate balancing act, namely realizing its ambition to simultaneously play the role of a regional heavyweight in the Caucasus and maintain a “multidimensional partnership” with Russia.

The Georgia war destroyed the status quo as Turkey's two main pillars of regional policy were effectively blown up: two of the Caucasus conflicts became "defrosted," and Russia chose to forgo restraint, displaying instead the willingness and resolve to resort to force.

The war put the Turkish-Russian relationship under additional strain. It also revealed a number of key factors and trends that are likely to affect the interaction between Russia and Turkey in the short to medium term. Among these trends are Moscow's growing assertiveness in what it chooses to call the areas of "privileged interests," including in the region where Russia's and Turkey's strategic neighborhoods effectively overlap; the vulnerability of Turkey's geopolitical position following the collapse of the Caucasus status quo; Moscow's increased leverage with Ankara due to Russia's hefty surplus in bilateral trade; and Turkey's growing energy dependence on Russia.

The Georgia crisis occurred at a time when both Russia and Turkey were demonstrating the tendency toward more unilateral conduct. Russia has abandoned any pretence of integration with the West and is casting itself as an independent Eurasian great power, while Turkey has shifted its focus away from its role as a NATO member toward that of a regional power. The two countries position themselves as pragmatic international players acting first and foremost on the basis of national interest.

But after the Georgia war, accommodating Russia's and Turkey's national interests in the Caucasus appears to be an increasingly complicated task. Ankara sought to repair the damage by advancing a regional security framework within which it would be possible to constrain Russia's assertive impulses as well as revitalize efforts to solve the regional conflicts, which Turkey recognizes may lead to new flare-ups and more destabilization. While noting certain positive aspects of the Ankara-sponsored Caucasus Pact (first of all, the scheme's intent to exclude "outside powers" from taking part in resolving the region's problems), the Russians are nonetheless wary of Turkey's desire to enhance its strategic posture in the South Caucasus.

Five Days that Shook the Caucasus

The August 2008 Russia-Georgia war may have been a brief affair but its many implications are likely to play out for a long time. The five-day battle has caused, as one Russian commentary put it, the “tectonic shifts” in regional geopolitics.¹ Naturally, the Caucasus crisis could not fail to affect the relationship between the two main regional powers – Russia and Turkey. Even before the “guns of August” thundered in the Caucasus, the relations between Moscow and Ankara were quite complex – combining elements of large-scale cooperation and subtle competition.²

The war put the relationship between Russia and Turkey under additional strain. It also revealed a number of key factors and trends that are likely to affect the interaction between Russia and Turkey in the short to medium term. Among these trends are Moscow’s growing assertiveness in what it chooses to call the areas of “privileged interests,” including in the region where Russia’s and Turkey’s strategic neighborhoods effectively overlap; the vulnerability of Turkey’s geopolitical position following the collapse of the Caucasus status quo; Moscow’s increased leverage with Ankara due to Russia’s having a hefty surplus in bilateral trade; and Turkey’s growing energy dependence on Russia.

Remarkably, the Georgia crisis occurred at a time when both Russia and Turkey were demonstrating the tendency toward a more unilateral conduct. Russia has abandoned any pretence of integration with the West and is casting itself as an independent Eurasian great power. For its part, Turkey has also undergone a dramatic strategic reorientation: it has moved “away from a role within a larger multilateral Western alliance toward a more unilateral assertion as an aspiring regional power.”³

¹ Vadim Dubnov, “Kontrapunkt v turetskom marshe,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 19, 2008.

² Igor Torbakov, “Making Sense of the Current Phase of Turkish-Russian Relations,” *The Jamestown Foundation Occasional Paper*, October 2007.

³ Richard Giragosian, “Redefining Turkey’s Strategic Orientation,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2007), 35.

Unraveling of the Old Status Quo

According to well-informed sources in Ankara, when Turkey rushed to formally recognize Kosovo's independence last February, the government officials in charge of affairs in the Caucasus appeared to be much less "enthusiastic" about the move than their colleagues from the Balkan departments.⁴ It would seem that Turkey's Caucasus experts had a better idea of how Russia might use the so called "Kosovo precedent" to advance its geopolitical interests in former Soviet lands and punish those politicians who throw into doubt the existence of Moscow's "sphere of influence." Nevertheless, the Turkish political class still hoped that the fragile balance of power and interests in the combustible Caucasus region could be maintained and the shaky status quo preserved.

The debacle caused by the Saakashvili government's adventure in South Ossetia and Russia's ruthless response has buried the pre-war status quo for good. Turkish elites are coming to realize that a new and tougher geopolitical game is beginning in Eurasia, and Ankara will have to look for new approaches in its interactions with an assertive Russia. Following Russia's deliberate demonstration of strength in the Caucasus, Turkish analysts appear to have no doubts that Moscow sought to cast itself as a regional hegemon.

It was precisely the ambivalent situation which existed in the South Caucasus before August 7 that allowed Ankara to pursue a rather ambiguous policy in the region. The main features of this situation were the seemingly "frozen" state of the local conflicts and Russia's relatively restrained behavior. These circumstances were seen as beneficial for Turkey's delicate balancing act – namely, simultaneously playing the role of a regional heavyweight in the Caucasus and maintaining a "multidimensional partnership" with Russia.

⁴ Barcin Yinanc, "The Need to Check Russia," *Turkish Daily News*, August 12, 2008.

All the frictions between Ankara and Washington notwithstanding, Turkey, a NATO member and U.S. ally, held that its ultimate geopolitical interest lay in the preservation of the “geopolitical pluralism” in post-Soviet Eurasia in general and in the South Caucasus in particular. Politically, maintaining “pluralism” meant the strengthening of regional countries’ political sovereignty, countering the growth of Russian influence in the Caucasus (which has been done largely in a covert rather than overt way), and fostering the development of closer ties between nations in the South Caucasus and Euro-Atlantic organizations. Naturally, Ankara’s understanding of “pluralism” included the growth of Turkey’s own influence in the region (like post-Soviet Russia, the post-Ottoman Republic of Turkey is a nation with a pronounced imperial outlook, which, depending on the context, readily regards itself as a Balkan, Middle East, or Caucasus power). It was within the context of the “geopolitical pluralism” policy that Ankara signed a limited defense cooperation agreement with Georgia and Azerbaijan.⁵ In 2006, Ankara offered Tbilisi \$1.8 million in military aid. The agreement also provided an opportunity for Georgian officers to receive military training in Turkey.⁶

Economically, “pluralism” largely meant the construction of multiple oil and gas pipelines traversing the “Caucasus transit corridor” (and Turkey’s territory) and bringing Caspian hydrocarbons to the world markets while bypassing Russia. Turkey’s strategic goal has been to maximally exploit the economic dimension of the “pluralism” policy in order to turn the country into a major energy transit hub, through which Caspian fuel would be transported to Europe and other markets. It would appear that this goal so much cherished by Turkish elites was almost within reach before the Georgia war broke out: two major projects – the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the parallel Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline – had been recently realized, and several new ambitious projects, such as the Trans-Caspian pipeline and Nabucco pipeline, were being actively discussed.

⁵ Igor Torbakov, “A New Security Arrangement Takes Shape in the South Caucasus,” *EurasiaNet*, January 24, 2002.

⁶ Gareth Jenkins, “Turkey Caught in a Dilemma over South Ossetia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 11, 2008.

Clearly, these aspects of Ankara's policies in the Caucasus have been not to Moscow's liking: Turkey has effectively sought to rival Russia, both as an assertive geopolitical player in the Caucasus and as an alternative energy conduit. But on the other hand, over the last five to seven years, Russia has become Turkey's major trading partner, and energy cooperation (particularly the supply of Russian natural gas) plays an extremely important role in the overall context of economic relations between the two countries. For example, Turkey depends on Russia for 29 percent of its oil and 63 percent of its natural gas. "The trade volume between Turkey and Russia is expected to reach \$38 billion this year, up from \$27 billion the previous year, according to Turkish estimates," reported the *Turkish Daily News*.⁷ Turkish investments into the Russian economy amount to \$5 billion, and the overall volume of Russian contracts signed by Turkish construction firms is in excess of \$25 billion.⁸ Furthermore, Ankara's sophisticated diplomacy has always been inclined to look for suitable compromises with Moscow and is ready, if need be, to accommodate Russia's strategic interests in the Caucasus.

Since the preservation of the status quo in the South Caucasus – and thus the ability to pursue an ambivalent policy – by and large suited Ankara's purposes just fine, the key foreign policy mantras reiterated by the Turkish elite have until very recently been "maintaining regional stability" and "keeping intact the existing balance of power and interests." The Georgia war disrupted the pre-August 7 status quo as Turkey's two main pillars of regional policy were effectively destroyed: two of the Caucasus "frozen" conflicts became "defrosted", and Russia chose to forgo restraint, displaying instead the willingness and resolve to resort to force.

A new kind of game ushered in by the Russian invasion of Georgia made it abundantly clear that Turkey's political and economic interests in the region are vulnerable. That's why Ankara wasted no time embarking on an urgent "damage control" operation, having advanced a grand scheme to (re)stabilize the region – the Caucasus Stability and

⁷ "Diplomats seek exit from row with Russia," *Turkish Daily News*, September 2, 2008.

⁸ Bakhtiyar Akhmedkhanov, "Turetskii soyuz," *Profil*, no. 33, September 8, 2008.

Cooperation Platform (CSCP). Remarkably, the Turkish leadership chose Moscow as the venue where the regional pact's blueprint was first unveiled.⁹ The decision reflects Ankara's awareness of an increasingly complex reality: Russia is potentially both a threat and the main partner in the challenging business of stabilizing the volatile Caucasus.

Russia's Resurgence and Turkey's Dilemmas

The Russo-Georgian war has significantly changed the overall geopolitical balance in the entire South Caucasus and Caspian region. Having demonstrated the political will and readiness to use all the means at its disposal in pursuing its strategic objectives, including military force, Russia emerged from the Caucasus conflict (at least for now) as an indisputably dominant power in the region. All the noisy Western rhetoric that had blasted the "Russian aggression" notwithstanding, the West has in practice acquiesced to Russia the role of the predominant geopolitical and security force in the South Caucasus. The series of agreements between Moscow and Tbilisi reached with the help of Western mediation only underscore the emergence of a new geopolitical reality on the ground: although Western actors maintain a presence in the region, they can "act only in the areas approved by Russia and within the limits set by Russia."¹⁰

Furthermore, the West (and specifically the United States) demonstrated both unwillingness and inability to firmly counter what the Western nations themselves indignantly characterized as Russia's "aggressive and inadmissible actions" in Georgia. The U.S. and the EU appear to be torn: while the Americans and the Europeans are loath to grant Russia the exclusive right to shape the destinies of post-Soviet Eurasia, they seem incapable of resolutely opposing Moscow's assertive policy. In the eyes of Russia's nervous neighbors, the West has all but lost credibility as a security

⁹ "Erdogan on a surprise trip to Russia," *Turkish Daily News*, August 14, 2008; "Turkey steps into Georgia conflict," *Today's Zaman*, August 14, 2008.

¹⁰ Krzysztof Strachota, "The Southern Caucasus and Central Asia after the Russian-Georgian War: The Geopolitical Consequences," *CES Commentary* 10 (2008), 3.

counterbalance to Russia. “The weak Western response to the conflict in Georgia,” most international and regional analysts note, “has left many key allies feeling vulnerable.”¹¹

In the aftermath of the Georgia war, the precarious nature of Turkey’s strategic position became abundantly clear. “The conflict introduced instability and dangerous unpredictability immediately beyond Turkey’s northeastern border after a period of relative calm in the Caucasus,” points out Bulent Aliriza, a Turkey expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. “It also placed Turkey in a difficult diplomatic position, not only between two neighboring countries with which it has been cultivating close relations and cooperation, especially on energy, but also between the United States and Russia.”¹²

Ankara appears to be especially wary of the potential escalation between the two erstwhile Cold War rivals. The growing tension in Russian-American relations may well turn what Turkish leaders believe is one of their main strategic assets into a liability. Since the demise of Communism and the end of the Cold War, in which Turkey participated as a vulnerable frontline state defending NATO’s southern flank, Turkey’s elites have been energetically promoting the country’s “unique geopolitical location” as one of its most prized strategic assets. Indeed, situated as it is between “the West and the East,” “secularism and Islam,” “modernity and tradition,” “democracy and tyranny,” Turkey seemed destined, in the new and seemingly more benign post-Cold War era, to play the role of a proverbial “bridge,” a “connecting link,” and a “mediator”. For Turkish planners, Ankara’s ability to take advantage of the country’s geographic position and pursue a well-balanced “all-azimuths” foreign policy striving for “zero problems” with its neighbors has been seen both as a means to secure a friendly neighborhood and a sine qua non for Turkey’s role as a successful “middleman” – especially in the lucrative energy sphere. Here is how prominent Turkish political analyst Tahya Akyol summed up this foreign policy paradigm in a recent commentary published in the *Milliyet* newspaper:

¹¹ “Russia’s Neighborhood Strife,” *Jane’s Foreign Report*, September 26, 2008.

¹² Bulent Aliriza, “Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus,” *CSIS Turkey Project Commentary*, September 9, 2008, www.csis.org/turkey.

Anatolia's geography required giving priority to looking towards the West during the Byzantine and Ottoman eras, while never ignoring the Caucasus and the Middle East. Of course, nuances change, depending on events and problems. A Turkey directed towards the West would never ignore Russia, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Middle East or the Mediterranean. The symphony of changing and complicated nuances depends on the ability of our foreign policy and the size of our power. There's no such thing as an infallible policy, but Turkey has avoided making huge foreign policy mistakes. Its basic principles are sound.¹³

Geopolitically, the period immediately following the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been a very beneficial time for Turkey: the confrontation between the two superpowers appeared to be finally relegated to the dustbin of history; Moscow's ambitions were constrained by Russia's economic weakness and the precipitous decline of the country's military might; and new avenues for mutually advantageous cooperation have been opened up with ex-Soviet nations, including Russia. But the Caucasus crisis seemed to have brought back the specter of East-West confrontation and immediately threw into doubt the very notion of Turkey being particularly blessed with a "unique geographic location." Should the going get tougher in the Caucasus between the West and Russia, Turkey, being the sole NATO member in the region, is likely to see its present-day advantageous position of a "middleman" morphing again into an unenviable status of a "frontline state" – with all the ensuing negative consequences.

In fact, Turkey has already faced serious pressure and suffered significant economic losses during the recent Caucasus crisis, in which Russia sought to humiliate Georgia and reassert its strategic posture in what is effectively Moscow's and Ankara's common neighborhood. Turkish policymakers and analysts could not fail to notice the grave accusations that Russia has leveled against a number of countries which supplied military

¹³ Quoted in M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia and Turkey Tango in the Black Sea," *Asia Times*, September 11, 2008.

hardware to Tbilisi. These countries, various Russian officials asserted, are accomplices in the crime of “genocide” that the Georgian military allegedly perpetrated against the South Ossetians. Among several countries that provided Georgia with weapons, two Black Sea area nations were specifically mentioned by the Russians – Ukraine and Turkey.

When Washington sent warships into the Black Sea to transport humanitarian aid to Georgia, the deputy chief of the Russian General Staff immediately invoked the Montreaux Convention, using the 1936 agreement to argue that ships belonging to non-littoral countries may not remain in the Black Sea for longer than 21 days. As Abbas Djavadi, an associate director of broadcasting at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, pointed out, Turkish media quoted the top Russian commander “as warning that Moscow will wait until that deadline expires, after which it will ‘hold Turkey responsible for the situation.’”¹⁴ Some Turkish analysts were seriously concerned at the time that Russia might indeed use Turkey as a “scapegoat” if the warships did not leave. “Of course it is not just Turkey’s responsibility, it is all the parties that signed Montreaux,” noted Hasan Ozertem of the USAK think-tank. “But the Russians may not see it that way.”¹⁵

In the end of August – beginning of September, the Russians persistently contacted Turkey through multiple diplomatic channels to make sure that Turkey, the controlling country, upholds the convention. Symptomatically, the Russian-Turkish frictions over U.S. naval presence in the Black Sea coincided with a bitter trade row between Moscow and Ankara after thousands of Turkish trucks were held up at Russian border posts. It would appear that the problem initially emerged in mid-June but grew significantly worse with the beginning of the Georgia war.¹⁶ Russian diplomats interviewed by Turkish media were keen to point out that the crisis over customs procedures was “entirely an

¹⁴ Abbas Djavadi, “Russia Turns Up The Pressure On Turkey,” *RFE/RL*, September 1, 2008.

¹⁵ Alex Barker, “Turkey Threatens Russian Trade Curbs,” *Financial Times*, August 30, 2008.

¹⁶ Sinan Ogan, “Crisis over Customs Procedures with Russia: Risks and Opportunities,” *Today’s Zaman*, September 7, 2008.

economic one and had nothing to do with politics.”¹⁷ But a number of top Turkish officials and political analysts feared that the dispute differed significantly from the previous trade disagreements in that this time Russia pressured Turkey for geopolitical reasons trying to prevent more American warships from passing through the Straits into the Black Sea. According to Cengiz Aktar, a professor of international relations at Istanbul Bahcesehir University, Russia was “blackmailing Turkey by stopping these trucks. This is a warning that there could be more pain to come.” Turkey, asserted Aktar, found itself “trapped” between Russia on the one hand and the U.S. and NATO on the other.¹⁸

Indeed, whatever triggered the trade dispute in the first place, the incident highlighted Ankara’s precarious diplomatic position between its NATO allies and Moscow. But what is even more important is that the export row revealed Turkey’s weakness vis-à-vis Russia: Ankara clearly lacked leverage to deal with Moscow on the equal footing.¹⁹ Faced with the situation whereby the columns of Turkish trucks would be stranded at the Russian border for weeks after being denied access by customs officials, Ankara threatened to block Russian imports in retaliation for Moscow’s move. Turkey’s foreign trade minister Kursad Tuzmen warned that “whatever is being done to Turkish goods in Russia, we will do the same things to Russian goods.”²⁰ However, it quickly dawned on the Turkish leadership that any such development could threaten Turkey’s energy supplies. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan immediately disavowed Tuzmen’s statement, noting that Turkey could not afford disruption in bilateral ties given its heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas. “Otherwise, we would be kept in the dark,” Erdoğan said glumly.²¹

¹⁷ *Turkish Daily News*, September 2, 2008.

¹⁸ Barker, “Turkey Threatens”

¹⁹ Gareth Jenkins, “Ongoing Trade Crisis Demonstrates Turkey’s Lack of Leverage Against Russia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 9, 2008.

²⁰ Robert Tait, “Trade War Looms Between Moscow and Ankara,” *Guardian*, September 1, 2008.

²¹ “Turkey Cannot Afford Disruption in Ties with Russia, Says Erdogan,” *Turkish Daily News*, September 1, 2008.

The Turkish business community also called for a reality check, noting that Ankara “should not deceive itself.” “Our share in trade with Russia is low compared to the Russian share in our trade,” Turgut Gur, the head of the Turkish-Russian Business Council, pointed out, adding that Turkey therefore had to tread very carefully.²² In the opinion of Oguz Satici, president of the influential Turkish Exporters’ Assembly, the importance of Russian-Turkish trade ties cannot be emphasized enough. “Strong historical, social, cultural, political and economic ties connect the two countries,” he asserted in a recent interview. “Russia is our biggest trade partner and trade relations between the two countries cannot be deferred.” Remarkably, the top Turkish businessman put economic relations with Russia on par with those Ankara has with Europe. “The Russian market is as important to us as the European Union,” Satici said.²³

But the paradox of Russia-Turkey economic relations lies in the fact that while Moscow and Ankara are engaged in an intense partnership, including in the energy sphere, they are at the same time fiercely competing with one another – again, in the same energy sphere. Russia’s goal is to increase Turkey’s dependence on its natural gas supplies while preventing the construction of pipelines running out of the energy-rich Central Asian and Caspian region not under Kremlin control. For its part, Ankara is striving to diversify its energy sources and turn the country into a major transit hub, facilitating the transportation of Central Asian and Caspian hydrocarbons to Europe.

One of the major consequences of the Georgia war, most analysts contend, is that Turkey’s (and, arguably, Europe’s) energy ambitions appear to have hit a wall.²⁴ Prior to the hostilities in the Caucasus, the EU and Turkey had been engaged in developing a so-called “Fourth Corridor” to carry Caspian and Middle Eastern gas to Europe, in addition to the existing corridors bringing natural gas from Russia, Norway, and Algeria. Now, in

²² *Turkish Daily News*, September 2, 2008.

²³ Ekrem Ekici, “Russia ‘As Important As EU’ in Trade,” *Turkish Daily News*, September 8, 2008.

²⁴ See Bruce Pannier, “Russia-Georgia Conflict Raises Concerns About Caspian Energy,” *RFE/RL*, August 13, 2008; “Caspian Basin: Russia Uses Its Georgia Position to Enhance Its Energy Leverage,” *EurasiaNet*, August 25, 2008.

the words of John Roberts, an energy security specialist for Platts, “the Georgian war will make it much harder for Western companies to raise commercial finance for new gas lines in the Caspian, the South Caucasus and the Black Sea and for companies alone to secure the necessary commitments, both to provide the gas upstream and to buy it downstream.”²⁵

Sparked by an obscure interethnic conflict in the Caucasus Mountains, the seemingly local Georgia war is in fact a crucial episode in the complex geopolitical and geoeconomic games that are being played out in the region. Symptomatically, the Russian incursion into Georgia disrupted the only energy export routes that were not controlled by Moscow. At one point during the crisis, as the *Economist* aptly noted, “The only pipeline from Azerbaijan that was fully operational was the one running through Russian soil carrying Caspian oil to the port of Novorossiisk.”²⁶ Although by the end of August the main energy flows had resumed through the twin arteries – the BTC oil pipeline and the BTE gas pipeline – the big question now concerns their future security. Edward Chow, an energy expert at Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies, noted that “The Russians have clearly demonstrated their military capability of getting very close to the pipelines”.²⁷ Even larger questions surround the plans for future pipeline routes through the South Caucasus. Many energy experts suggest that Georgia’s vulnerability may have dealt a “lethal blow” to Nabucco and plans for a Trans-Caspian pipeline. Europe was “shocked” by the region’s instability and realized that “hardly anyone would invest money in new projects” associated with Georgia, argued Konstantin Simonov, director of the Moscow-based Fund for National Energy Security.²⁸ Most Western analysts appear to share this view. “It is hard to see through the fog of this war another pipeline through Georgia,” said Cliff Kupchan, a political risk analyst at Eurasia Group. “Moving forward, multinationals and Central Asian and Caspian governments

²⁵ John Roberts, “Going for Gas,” *World Today*, October 2008, 15.

²⁶ “The Dangers of the Safe Route,” *Economist*, August 14, 2008.

²⁷ Elizabeth Douglass, “Russia-Georgia Conflict Raises Worries Over Oil and Gas Pipelines,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2008.

²⁸ Anatoly Medetsky, “War Casts Cloud Over Pipeline Route,” *Moscow Times*, August 14, 2008.

may think twice about building new lines through this corridor. It may even call into question the reliability of moving existing volumes through that corridor.”²⁹

But what concerns Tbilisi concerns also Ankara’s vital interests as Turkey, like Georgia, is aspiring to play the role of a key transit country in the Western-sponsored grand strategy of the diversification of energy supplies.³⁰ Both countries represent the individual legs of the same major energy corridor that includes the already functioning pipelines, such as the BTC and the BTE as well as those projects that have long been on the drawing board, like Nabucco. No wonder that Russian officials and analysts are now contending that Turkey is as unreliable transit country as is Georgia. Writing in a recent commentary for the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper, Sergei Pravosudov, director of Moscow’s National Energy Institute, bluntly stated that “the transportation of hydrocarbons through Turkish territory has always been marked by instability.” Now, after the Georgia war, Pravosudov asserted, building the Nabucco gas pipeline looks like an “absolutely surreal enterprise.”³¹ Many Turkish and international analysts seem to agree. “Russia’s occupation of Georgia has dealt a blow to such plans,” conceded Soner Cagaptay, a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “By occupying Georgia, Russia has exhausted the U.S-Turkish plans to boost the East-West corridor and make Turkey an entrepôt of Caspian energy. Moscow has also preemptively blocked the EU’s plans to buy energy from the Caspian basin without having to go through Russia.”³²

Being fully aware of this particular impact of the Georgia war, the Russians find it difficult to refrain from swaggering. All European criticism of Russia’s behavior

²⁹ Jad Mouawad, “Conflict in Georgia Narrows Oil Options for West,” *International Herald Tribune*, August 14, 2008.

³⁰ As one recent Turkish commentary acknowledged, “the latest developments [in the Caucasus] will damage Turkey and Turkey’s Caucasus and Central Asia policies as much as they did Georgia.” See Mitat Celikpala, “The New Battle Zone for Global Hegemony: the Caucasus,” *Turkish Daily News*, October 22, 2008.

³¹ Sergei Pravosudov, “SShA sami sebia vysekli,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, September 5, 2008.

³² Soner Cagaptay, “The Caucasus: Small War, Big Damage,” *Turkish Daily News*, September 8, 2008.

notwithstanding, they assert that the EU will continue developing economic ties with Moscow – especially in the energy sphere. “That’s why there is no doubt,” the energy analyst Pravosudov stated confidently, “that the Nord Stream and the South Stream gas pipelines will be built according to schedule and the supplies of Russian gas to Europe will continue to grow steadily.”³³

The bottom line here is this: The Georgia war appears to be, as some commentators have suggested, Russia’s “effective gambit in the new Great Game”³⁴ that directly affects the Russo-Turkish relations. Two strategic visions seem to have clashed in the South Caucasus. As the Russians see it, the Western (mostly U.S.) grand strategy has been based on the premise that Turkey allied with Azerbaijan and Georgia would form a strategic transit corridor and become a major energy conduit for Europe. This “Caucasus axis” has enjoyed full support both in Brussels and Washington. The U.S. has been particularly interested in bringing the regional countries into its security system. This move would have allowed Washington to have a military presence in the South Caucasus – a strategic location in close proximity both to Russia and Iran. In accordance with this vision, Moscow was destined to gradually lose its influence in the South Caucasus. After Azerbaijan’s and Georgia’s eventual accession to NATO, Russia was supposed to drop out of game altogether. As for Armenia, Russia’s sole ally in the South Caucasus would be faced with a stark choice. Yerevan would have to either opt for joining the Atlantic Alliance (possibly under Ankara’s guidance) or risk further isolation.³⁵

The Kremlin, naturally, has sought to counter what it believed was the U.S.-sponsored Caucasus scenario. Russia’s strategic objective has been to restore its geopolitical dominance in the Caucasus and tighten its grip on the region’s energy resources. By invading Georgia, Moscow, in one move, has arguably achieved just that: it “has reestablished a hold over the narrow strategic corridor of the South Caucasus” and “reasserted its influence over energy supply routes and suppliers from the Caspian basin

³³ Pravosudov, “SShA sami sebia vysekli.”

³⁴ “Russia’s Grip On Energy,” *Financial Times*, August 26, 2008.

³⁵ Pavel Sarkisyan, “Ankara smeshchaet kavkazskii aktsent,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, September 15, 2008.

and Central Asia.”³⁶ After Georgia, Turkey appears to be facing some hard choices as it is being challenged by a resurgent Moscow and by threatened by the prospect of energy transport routes being reoriented toward Russia.³⁷

The Caucasus Pact: Seeking Accommodation with Russia

As the Russia-West confrontation was escalating in the immediate aftermath of the Caucasus war, Ankara desperately wanted the crisis to end. As both Washington and Moscow continued to pressure Turkey, the Erdogan government felt increasingly uncomfortable. Given Turkey’s long-standing and intimate links with the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand, and the country’s “multidimensional partnership” with Russia on the other, the necessity to make an “existential” choice between the rival centers of power appeared to be Ankara’s nightmare scenario. On September 2, Erdogan made it clear that Turkey was extremely reluctant to choose sides. In comments published in *Milliyet*, Erdogan said:

It would not be right for Turkey to be pushed toward any side. Certain circles want to push Turkey into a corner either with the United States or Russia after the Georgian incident. One of the sides is our closest ally, the United States. The other side is Russia with which we have an important trade volume. We would act in the line with what Turkey’s national interests require.³⁸

Turkey’s position vis-à-vis Russia has since been defined in greater detail by Prof. Ahmet Davutoglu, Erdogan’s chief foreign-policy advisor. In a wide-ranging commentary published by the Council on Foreign Relations, Davutoglu noted that Turkey, being a member of NATO and a candidate for EU membership, does not have problems with its

³⁶ *Financial Times*, August 26, 2008.

³⁷ Aleksandr Sadovnikov, “Kaspiiskaia neft’ ne prosochitsia mimo,” *Parlamentskaia gazeta*, October 14, 2008.

³⁸ Quoted in Aliriza, “Turkey and the Crisis”

international identity and has chosen its place. His country, he stated, is a “part of the Western bloc -- there is no question about it.” “But you can’t say that Turkish-Russian relations can be like Danish-Russian relations, or Norwegian-Russian relations, or Canada-Russian relations,” Davutoglu immediately added:

Any other European country can follow certain isolationist policies against Russia. Can Turkey do this? I ask you to understand the geographical conditions of Turkey.... If you isolate Russia, economically, can Turkey afford this? ... Unfortunately, we have to admit this fact. Turkey is almost 75-80 percent dependent on Russia [for energy]. We don’t want to see a Russian-American or Russian-NATO confrontation. ... We don’t want to pay the bill of strategic mistakes or miscalculation by Russia, or by Georgia.³⁹

What the Erdogan top aide spelled out is the crux of the matter. Put another way, Turkey is not in a position to isolate, confront or otherwise antagonize Russia (even if Moscow sometimes infringes upon Turkey’s interests) because Ankara depends heavily on Russia in terms of energy supplies, values extensive trade ties with Moscow, and simply does not have enough leverage with its resurgent northern neighbor. The only viable option that is left for the Turkish leadership is to pursue a highly nuanced Russia policy whereby competition with Moscow is balanced by the policies of engagement, partnership, and accommodation. As the pre-Georgia war status quo cannot be restored, advancing the Caucasus Stability Pact is seen by the Turkish elites as a second-best policy option giving Ankara an opportunity to reengage Russia and regional countries in the new geopolitical setting.

The Erdogan government’s Caucasus initiative aims to address Turkey’s two major strategic concerns. First, Ankara holds that instability in the neighboring region is not good for the country’s national security. Thus the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation

³⁹ “Turkey’s Top Foreign Policy Aide Worries about False Optimism in Iraq,” Council on Foreign Relations, CFR.org, September 19, 2008.

Platform seeks to lower the current level of confrontation by setting up a regional forum where local conflicts can be discussed and resolved. Ankara appears to have no illusions about the immediate success of the CSCP. The Turkish objective is rather to facilitate talks between the five countries that would reduce tensions and ultimately strengthen stability and support regional relations.

Second, Turkey understands full well that instability in the Caucasus is bad for business. The Georgia war exposed the vulnerability of the energy transit routes that traverse Georgian territory. If Turkey wants to realize its goal of becoming a major energy hub, Turkish and international analysts argue, it has to find an alternative transit corridor for Caspian hydrocarbons to match the one running across Georgia. The CSCP is meant to resolve precisely this problem: the stability of energy transit lies at the heart of Turkey's Caucasus Pact. Turkish President Abdullah Gul could not put it more explicitly:

The Caucasus are key as far as energy resources and the safe transportation of energy from the east to the west. That transportation goes through Turkey. That is why we are very active in trying to achieve an atmosphere of dialogue, so there is the right climate to resolve the problems. If there is instability in the Caucasus, it would be sort of like a wall between the East and West; if you have stability in the region, it could be a gate.⁴⁰

Gul's September 6 breakthrough visit to Yerevan should be seen in this very context. After the supply of fuel was interrupted by the hostilities in Georgia, Turkish planners seemed to arrive at the conclusion that Armenia might play the role of an alternative transit country. It is absolutely clear that the normalization of Turkish-Armenian and Azeri-Armenian relations and Yerevan's inclusion into the regional energy infrastructure are sine qua non for having Armenia support Turkey's plan for the stabilization of the South Caucasus.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Rana Foroohar, "Pulled From Two Directions," *Newsweek*, October 13, 2008.

⁴¹ Yasemin Congar, "Caucasus Plan Void Without Yerevan," *Turkish Daily News*, August 18, 2008; Richard Giragosian, "Armenia and the New Turkish Proposal," *Turkish Daily News*, August 22, 2008;

The Russian leadership understands what is behind Turkey's foreign policy activism. It has been prompted, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted, by the "geopolitical consequences of the Caucasus crisis."⁴² Remarkably, the Russians seem to believe that the new geopolitical situation that emerged in the wake of the Georgia war is likely to be conducive to fostering Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Reflecting on how the current situation in the Caucasus can influence the relations between Russia and Turkey, Aleksandr Krylov, a researcher at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow, suggested that the crisis actually "could improve them." He bases his argument on the premise that the crises and instability in the South Caucasus concern mainly the regional powers – Russia, Turkey and Iran. "The parties situated further away, such as the U.S. and the EU," argues Krylov, "have little incentive to consider their moves carefully. In fact, their moves often run contrary to the interests of Turkey, Iran and Russia." The way to proceed in stabilizing the situation, the Russian analyst contends, is for the three regional powers to coordinate their Caucasus policies. Krylov and the like-minded Russian experts believe that the "coordinated or separate actions [of Russia, Iran and Turkey] would be more positive and fruitful than the actions of more distant countries, such as the US and the EU."⁴³

This analysis appears to be neatly reflecting Russia's official position. When Lavrov visited Turkey in early September, he backed Ankara's ambitious plan for the stabilization of the Caucasus. "The countries of the region themselves should resolve their problems," said Russia's top diplomat. This key principle, he added, tellingly, constitutes the "main value" of the Turkish initiative.⁴⁴ Later, in a long interview with *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Russia's government newspaper, Lavrov praised the sophistication of the Turkish diplomacy:

"Turkey: Energy Cooperation With Armenia and Azerbaijan?" *Stratfor*, September 12, 2008; "Armenia Warms to Turkish Path," *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, October 9, 2008.

⁴² Vladislav Vorobyev, "Kliuch ot diplomata," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, October 7, 2008.

⁴³ Alexander Krylov, "Caucasian Conflict Improves Russia-Turkey Relations," *Today's Zaman*, September 13, 2008.

⁴⁴ Kseniia Fokina, "Rossiia i Turtsiia ne stali ssorit'sia iz-za Gruzii," *Izvestiia*, September 4, 2008.

In my opinion, the Turks have very timely understood the uniqueness of the moment... which allows them to raise their profile in the region. They are the immediate neighbors of the Caucasus and at the same time [Turkey is] the actor that has good relations with almost all the countries of the Caucasus region. The Turkish idea that it is above all the regional countries that have to collectively think about [setting up] some platform for stability and cooperation in the Caucasus reflects the maturity of the Turkish diplomacy.⁴⁵

Russian pundits' analyses of the shifts in Turkey's Caucasus policy often seek to place Ankara's international behavior in a broader context of the country's relations with Washington and Brussels. While Turkey continues to be a key ally of the West, some Russian experts note that it is becoming increasingly frustrated with the Western attitude. Turkey, they argue, has for too long been seen by Washington and Brussels mainly as the barrier against the spreading of at first Soviet and now Russian geopolitical influence. In other words, it has been regarded above all as a "military-political partner." Europe, Russian analysts claim, does not demonstrate its willingness to achieve a "full-blooded integration" with Turkey which would include also economic and cultural aspects.⁴⁶ As a result, Ankara appears to have lost all hopes of becoming a full member of the EU. Some Russian observers even suggested that the Turks probably became somewhat jealous when they saw how passionately certain Western politicians were backing the idea of Georgia's EU membership. All these factors have likely contributed to Turkey's decision to "launch an independent Caucasus policy and mull the possibility of forging an alliance with Russia," argues a commentary published in the *Rossiiskie Vesti* newspaper under the telltale title "Russian-Turkish Entente Cordiale?"⁴⁷

This Russo-Turkish regional alliance, Russian analysts argue, will emerge as a natural outcome of Moscow's and Ankara's common concerns about U.S. "destabilizing policies"

⁴⁵ *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, October 7, 2008.

⁴⁶ Sarkisyan, "Ankara smeshchaet kavkazskii aktsent"

⁴⁷ Dmitry Yermolayev, "Rossiisko-turetskaia Antanta?" *Rossiiskie vesti*, September 5, 2008.

in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, some Russian strategists point out that the Turks are wary of U.S. activism in the Black Sea region. For at least two centuries, they say, Turkish elites have been accustomed to perceive the Black Sea as an “internal lake” they shared with Russia. The establishment of U.S. military infrastructure in Bulgaria and Romania – littoral countries that recently became NATO members – has made the Turks unhappy.⁴⁸ In this respect, too, Russia, which opposes NATO eastward expansion and is adamantly against U.S. military deployments close to its borders, presents itself as Ankara’s potential ally.

In this sense, the Georgia war might well become an eye-opening moment for Turkish strategists, some Russian pundits suggest. “Why does Turkey need an alliance with the U.S. in the Caucasus if it cannot protect its political and energy interests?” one Russian commentator asks.⁴⁹ At the same time, the August crisis seemed to drive home an important message: Russia treats its national interests in the Caucasus as seriously as ever, and Ankara can increase its influence in the region only through coordinating its moves with Moscow.⁵⁰

The Russians seem to believe that the recent crisis in the Caucasus prompted the Turkish leadership to undertake a major rethink of regional geopolitics and shift gears. “Gul and Erdogan understood that in their search for the regional stability and security they were moving in the wrong direction,” and now Ankara is about to turn to Moscow, some Russian analysts contend.⁵¹ One commentary went so far as to suggest the emergence of the Russian-Turkish condominium in the South Caucasus. “It would seem that Ankara is simply offering Moscow to divide up the Caucasus between the two to them, with Turkey taking on a part of the responsibility for stability and security in the region,” wrote the *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* newspaper.⁵² For its part, the Kremlin can only welcome

⁴⁸ Vadim Timokhin, “Ankara: smena vekh?” *Krasnaia zvezda*, August 28, 2008.

⁴⁹ Sarkisyan, “Ankara smeshchaet kavkazskii aktsent.”

⁵⁰ Vitaly Dymarskii, “Kavkazskii igrovoi krug,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, October 16, 2008.

⁵¹ Sarkisyan, “Ankara smeshchaet kavkazskii aktsent.”

⁵² *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, October 16, 2008.

Turkey's leaning toward Russia and, naturally, is supportive of Ankara's Caucasus initiative as it reduces American strategic involvement in Caucasus affairs and helps make the region more "self-sustainable" and "dependent on the local players," among whom Moscow is of course an indisputable leader.⁵³

One cannot fail to notice that Russian planners view the Caucasus Pact blueprint in general and Russia-Turkey relations in particular through the prism of a zero-sum game with the Americans. As the influential *Kommersant* newspaper put it in a recent commentary, the most important feature of the CSCP is that it "will allow Moscow and Ankara to strengthen their positions in the Caucasus thereby weakening Washington's influence in the region."⁵⁴

Symptomatically, the notion of Russo-Turkish rapprochement appears to have a particular appeal for the Russian military. Writing in the *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Russian army newspaper, the security analyst Vadim Timokhin asserts that the stereotypes of Turkey as a "second-rate" country, America's loyal ally in the Middle East, NATO's outpost in the Caucasus, etc., are somewhat misleading if not plain wrong. The Caucasus crisis and Ankara's reaction to it, the analyst argues, warrant a thorough rethinking of Turkey's strategic posture.⁵⁵ The commentary enthuses about the prospects for a Russian-Turkish alliance. The shifts in Turkey's foreign policy orientation and its massive trade ties with Russia "provide an opportunity for finally drawing a line under the epoch of confrontation in the history of our relations," Timokhin suggests. "A rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara gives a chance to turn the Transcaucasus into a zone of stability and cooperation while neutralizing the efforts of the 'third parties' aimed at maintaining geopolitical instability in the region."⁵⁶

⁵³ Sarkisyan, "Ankara smeshchaet kavkazskii aktsent"

⁵⁴ Georgy Fridliand, "Turstiiia podygraet Rossii na Kavkaze," *Kommersant*, September 8, 2008.

⁵⁵ Timokhin, "Ankara: smena vekh?"

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

It is fascinating that the Russian military's approach towards Turkey appears to find its match in the position of the Turkish General Staff. The latter, well-informed sources report, "has been carefully cultivating its own links with the Russian military parallel to its traditionally close ties to the U.S. military establishment."⁵⁷

When the Russia-Georgia war broke out, some Turkish commentators began to ask how Ankara – and, specifically, the Turkish military – "might have behaved in Russia's stead."⁵⁸ The parallels with the Cyprus situation appear to be quite obvious. Russia's invasion of Georgia and its recognition of the two separatist enclaves' independence in a way repeat the story of Northern Cyprus. This statelet, recognized only by Ankara, declared its independence in 1983, 10 years after Turkey invaded the island claiming the need to protect the ethnic Turkish population there against assault by Greeks. Speaking with the Russian newspaper after the Georgia war, the Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat, while stressing that every country is "unique," still conceded that the Georgian and Cyprus cases "have a lot in common."⁵⁹ Now, a number of Turkish analysts say, suppose the Republic of Cyprus decided to put an end to Turkish Cypriots' demands. What would the Turkish military do?⁶⁰

But the Georgia war exposed another, arguably deeper fault line of the Turkish military's ambivalence. There have been reports in the Turkish media about the existence of a body of so-called "Russophiles" (or the "Young Russians," as some commentators mockingly call them) within the country's Armed Forces. The strategic outlook that this anti-Western and pro-Russian group of senior officers holds boils down to the following: America has betrayed Turkey; the country will never fit into the EU; and to avoid isolation, Turkey should become a member of a Eurasian alliance that will be built around a resurgent Russia.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Aliriza, "Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus."

⁵⁸ Andrew Finkel, "Georgia and Turkish Ambivalence," *Today's Zaman*, August 12, 2008.

⁵⁹ "Mehmet Ali Talat: Rossiia primeniaet dvoynye standarty," *Kommersant*, October 3, 2008.

⁶⁰ Finkel, "Georgia."

⁶¹ Ihsan Dagi, "A Pro-Russian Turkish General?" *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, May 31, 2007.

“These days, there is an increasing number of important men in the state establishment – both in uniform and in civilian attire – who think what would be unthinkable a few years ago: Turkey and Russia have never before been so close in terms of their ‘common interests and common threats,’ and, quoting the same men, ‘despite a mutual distrust that has existed for several centuries,’” wrote the astute Turkish commentator Burak Bekdil. These influential individuals ensconced in “several gray office buildings in Ankara” advocate forging a long-term strategic partnership with Russia – a policy, noted Bekdil, that includes, among other elements, “supporting Russia-backed energy plans, increasing the pace of defense cooperation and, as a derivative of the latter, awarding critical defense contracts to Russian contractors.”⁶²

Remarkably, in mid-September the Russian media reported that Moscow and Ankara signed a \$70 million contract for a batch of the Russian-made Kornet-E anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs). According to Interfax, the deal was made between the Russian arms monopoly Rosoboroneksport and Turkey’s Defense Ministry at the end of August.⁶³ “Over the last eleven years, it is the first contract envisaging the delivery of Russian hardware to Turkey, which is a NATO member,” Turkey’s defense official told Interfax.⁶⁴ As a long-standing U.S. Cold War ally, Turkey has a military outfitted mostly with American hardware. According to defense analysts, “the international ATGM market is fairly broad, and Ankara’s more traditional suppliers also have late-model ATGMs available for sale.”⁶⁵ As one commentary points out, “there is no clear military need for Turkey to get these ATGMs from the Russians.”⁶⁶ But what is particularly noteworthy is of course the timing of the Russian-Turkish arms deal. To be sure, from the point of view of the Western security community, “it is somewhat anomalous for

⁶² Burak Bekdil, “The Incursion Which Is Not – And Russophiles in Ankara,” *Turkish Daily News*, June 8, 2007.

⁶³ *Interfax-AVN*, September 16, 2008.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Russia, Turkey: A Reduction in Tensions,” *Stratfor*, September 19, 2008.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Turkey to be signing big defense deals with Russia against this revived Cold War backdrop.”⁶⁷

No wonder then that Turkish ambivalence during the Caucasus crisis prompted both Turkish and Western analysts to question how firmly Turkey is anchored in the North Atlantic security system and whether Ankara is still a truly reliable Western ally.⁶⁸ Most commentators have found the strategic orientation of the Turkish military quite problematic. “I believe that if Turkey had not already been a member of NATO, the Turkish military would be opposed to NATO membership as it is to EU accession,” argues the prominent Turkish academic and political analyst Ihsan Dagı.⁶⁹

Conclusion: Limits of Russia-Turkey Rapprochement

Like all countries in the region, Turkey was profoundly affected by the Caucasus war. Arguably, the conflict was a particular challenge for Turkey because it involved Ankara’s two indispensable partners. Georgia is a keystone in the Western-backed energy transportation network connecting Turkey with the Central Asian and Caspian energy riches. Russia is an extremely important trade partner and energy supplier. Furthermore, the war exposed Turkey’s vulnerability and weakness vis-à-vis Russia and its lack of leverage with Moscow. While Turkey’s Caucasus policy had been a delicate balancing act even before the August hostilities, Ankara’s post-war diplomacy in the region was compared by a number of commentators to a “tightrope dancer’s performance.”⁷⁰

Although Russia’s invasion of Georgia destroyed the Caucasus precarious status quo that Ankara was deftly taking exploiting in pursuing its political and economic ends in the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Zeyno Baran, “Will Turkey Abandon NATO?” *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2008; Ihsan Dagı, “Will the Turkish Military Abandon NATO?” *Today’s Zaman*, September 15, 2008.

⁶⁹ Dagı, “Will the Turkish Military Abandon NATO?”

⁷⁰ Mehmet Ali Birand, “Turkey Can’t Turn Its Back On Russia,” *Turkish Daily News*, September 3, 2008.

region, Turkey was not in a position to openly confront Moscow. “Russia came out from this [Georgian] mess more powerful,” one Turkish commentary noted somberly.⁷¹ Instead, Ankara sought to repair the damage by advancing a multilateral regional security framework within which it would be possible to constrain Russia’s assertive impulses as well as revitalize efforts to solve the regional conflicts as the latter might lead to new flairs and more destabilization. While promoting the Caucasus Pact, Ankara, as the weaker side, was seeking a certain accommodation with Russia. It would be too far fetched, however, to think that some major strategic realignment is taking place in the Caucasus leading to the emergence of a “Russo-Turkish axis.”

Turkey’s reluctance to take a clear-cut stance in the conflict or, as a NATO member and EU candidate country, unequivocally side with its Western allies does not mean that Ankara is ready to embrace a resurgent Moscow. In fact, the opposite is true: the more assertively Russia will behave in the two countries’ common neighborhood, the more wary of Moscow’s strategic designs Turkey will become.

The warming of Russian-Turkish relations that has been progressing since the beginning of this decade and the resulting boom in bilateral cooperation in the economic and political spheres were based on the two countries’ tacit understanding that they would refrain from pursuing overly assertive policies in the regions where their strategic interests overlap. But with the invasion of Georgia, Turkish analysts now say that “it seems that Russia has now moved to an assertive policy in the [Caucasus] region, claiming a zone of influence.”⁷² Such Russian conduct is seen by Turkish planners as muscular if not outright aggressive and is not in Ankara’s interests. Furthermore, some Turkish strategic thinkers believe that the Caucasus crisis is likely to have broader negative geopolitical implications for Turkey. It will be difficult for Ankara, they say, to engage with both Iran and Syria as these countries move closer to Russia in response to recent developments.⁷³

⁷¹ Murat Yetkin, “Lessons Turkey Should Learn From Georgia,” *Turkish Daily News*, August 12, 2008.

⁷² Ihsan Dagi, “Foreign Policy Challenges,” *Today’s Zaman*, August 25, 2008.

⁷³ Ibid.

Russia's efforts to undermine the East-West energy corridor add to Ankara's rising concerns about Moscow's role in the region. At an international conference sponsored by Turkey's Ari Movement that took place in Istanbul in mid-September, Sergei Markov, a Russian lawmaker and the Kremlin-connected political analyst, spelled out Moscow's credo in the energy transportation sphere with an unusual frankness. "Of course it is ideal for us that oil and gas pipelines pass from Russian soil," Markov said, clearly reflecting Russia's new confidence and assertiveness. "If the pipeline passes from our territory we support it, if it does not, we don't support it." When he was reminded of economic reciprocity and interdependence Markov said bluntly, "I want you to depend on me, rather than me depending on you."⁷⁴

Moscow's resurgence sets the limits for Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Russia's abrasive international conduct has already revived within the Turkish analytic community an image of a growling Russian bear threatening its neighbors.⁷⁵ One of the consequences of the Georgia war, notes the prominent Turkish commentator Semih Idiz, is that it has increased "the fear of the Russian bear, which will no doubt drive many countries to ensure that they reinforce their protection against Moscow and its military might."⁷⁶ A number of Turkish analysts and policymakers argue that Ankara, together with its Western allies, must find ways to urgently put Russia's strategic ambitions in check. "In the long run, an increasing Russian assertiveness in the region runs contrary to Turkish interests," asserts a commentary in the *Turkish Daily News* under the poignant title "The Need to Check Russia."⁷⁷

Remarkably, Russian strategists, for their part, appear to be equally wary of Turkey's desire to enhance its posture in the South Caucasus. Some Russian foreign policy commentators point out that Turkey's efforts to shift gears in the region and distance its

⁷⁴ *Turkish Daily News*, September 13, 2008.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Omer Taspinar, "The Russian Bear in Caucasia," *Today's Zaman*, August 11, 2008; Dogu Ergil, "Between the Bear and the Elephant," *Today's Zaman*, August 31, 2008.

⁷⁶ Semih Idiz, "Has Russia Really Achieved Its Goal?" *Turkish Daily News*, August 15, 2008.

⁷⁷ Barcin Yinanc, "The Need to Check Russia," *Turkish Daily News*, August 12, 2008.

policies from those of the U.S. does not in any way signal Ankara's willingness to forge something resembling an alliance-type relationship with Russia. Turkey, they argue, is pursuing its own economic and geopolitical interests in the Caucasus, seeking "to play an independent role" there.⁷⁸ While noting certain positive aspects of the Ankara-sponsored Caucasus Pact (first of all, the scheme's intent to exclude "outside powers" from taking part in the resolution of the region's problems), a number of Russian pundits question Turkey's and Russia's ability to "amicably co-exist" in the strategically important and conflict-torn South Caucasus. First, it is not clear whether Ankara's and Moscow's visions of their respective roles within the new regional equation are fully compatible. Second, both countries are very ambitious in their geopolitical aspirations and, historically, do not have much experience in protracted cooperation.⁷⁹

Some Russian planners are uneasy about Turkey's diplomatic activism – in particular, Ankara's efforts to improve relations with Armenia, Russia's strategic ally in the Caucasus, and mediate a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Russians understand Turkey's intentions, saying that the Karabakh settlement will create additional possibilities for the diversification of the energy supply routes to Europe. The necessity to secure this transportation network will foster the "militarization of the region" – through possible deployments of the military contingents from EU and NATO countries. Such a development, Russian analysts argue, will affect their country's security.⁸⁰ Overall, Ankara's claims to an enhanced role in the Caucasus affairs are perceived with a certain apprehension in Moscow. "There is no doubt," one Russian commentary asserts, "that the strengthening of Turkey's influence in the [Caucasus] region will threaten Russia's geopolitical interests."⁸¹

So far, the official rhetoric in both countries stresses the commonality of interests and exalts the values of cooperation. Judging by the pronouncements of Russian and Turkish

⁷⁸ Andrei Korbut, "Yuzhnokavkazskii tupik," *Voенно-промышленnyi kur'er*, September 24, 2008.

⁷⁹ Sarkisyan, "Ankara smeshchaet kavkazskii aktsent

⁸⁰ Korbut, "Yuzhnokavkazskii tupik."

⁸¹ Ibid.

leaders, Ankara and Moscow have emerged from the Georgia war as the best of friends. “Our relations with the Russian Federation have actually gone beyond the special,” Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan told reporters at the Victory Day reception in Ankara.⁸² For his part, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev highly praised the Russian-Turkish “multifaceted partnership.” Speaking on September 18 at the Kremlin ceremony at which the new Turkish Ambassador to Moscow Halil Akinci presented his credentials to him, Medvedev said that “the cooperation between our countries is a significant factor in ensuring peace, security and stability in the Black Sea and the Caucasus.”⁸³

But the geopolitical tussle in the volatile Caucasus is far from over. Some Russian and Turkish analysts appear to be anticipating a less than altruistic scenario: first, Ankara and Moscow will succeed in dramatically reducing U.S. influence in the region; then, they will lock horns in the scramble over the “American succession.”

⁸² *Turkish Daily News*, September 1, 2008.

⁸³ *Today's Zaman*, September 20, 2008.