
The Caucasus Crisis And Turkey's Constructive Role

By Bulent KeneÅ~
www.worldbulletin.net - 31/8/2008

The world has focused on the course of the crisis that erupted in the Caucasus. How this crisis will develop closely interests the US, NATO, the EU and all major countries as well as other global players.

Obviously, Turkey is one of the parties most interested in the crisis, and for this reason, Turkey is trying to devise its foreign policy with this in mind. Given how things have developed since the crisis was first fueled in Georgia, one can easily assert that the period before us is much more critical than the last month. We can similarly suggest that the tension has the potential of escalating at any moment. This may create new dangers and threats to Turkey.

Actually, Turkish diplomatic circles have for some time had the uneasy feeling that such a crisis was in the making in Caucasus. Both the ATO Bucharest summit and a speech then-Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered at the 2007 International Security Conference in Munich were warning signals that a crisis was brewing. However, despite these unmistakable signs, the traditional clumsiness of the Western alliance to make up its mind rendered the crisis inevitable.

Actually, the process of how the inevitability of this crisis has become obvious can, in a sense, be traced back to the 9/11 attacks. As you will remember, in the post-9/11 era, each country had adopted a unique position and saw these attacks as an opportunity for destroying its own "terrorists." Thus, Russia perceived Chechnya as such and implemented its policies based on this perception. You will also remember that under the circumstances of the time, the West did not make much noise over Russian policy.

On the other hand, in the same period, the US was so obsessed with dealing with its own "terrorists" - Afghanistan and Iraq -- that it failed to implement reasonable policies that would have prevented Russia's comeback to its near abroad after reclaiming power, made convenient by rising energy prices. Even the colorful revolutions that changed regimes in Russia's near abroad were not well planned. Thus, in this process, all post-Cold War era crises that had been held in abeyance started to emerge. Feeling that it was being cornered by unilateral security and containment moves made hastily and aggressively by the US, Russia started to play its cards with a self-confidence boosted by its accumulation of power. The miscalculated move ventured by Georgian President Mikhail Sakaashvili, who underestimated Russia with the enthusiasm of Western encouragement and who wanted to guarantee Georgia's NATO membership, turned a local problem into an international crisis in the blink of an eye.

Turkey has long supported Ukraine and Georgia's NATO membership provided they solve their border disputes and domestic ethnic problems, and with the emerging crisis Turkey had to straddle both sides. Indeed, Turkey has no chance of foregoing its relations with Russia for the sake of the US, and vice versa. Turkey has to move very carefully and pursue a very delicately balanced policy between its strategic partner the US and NATO on the one hand and its biggest trade partner and neighbor Russia on the other. Actually, it is doing this successfully. Without acting against Russia or the US, Turkey is striving to develop a different and sui generis policy. The most salient element of this policy is the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Initiative. The initiative aims to eliminate the extreme lack of confidence among

countries in the region and disperse the pessimistic atmosphere caused by the war and replace it with an optimistic one.

We can suggest that by pushing the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Initiative to the fore, Turkish foreign policy views the Caucasus crisis as part of a strategic whole, assessing the crisis from four levels and developing policies based on this perception. In the early days of the crisis, Turkish diplomacy attempted to contain the issue as one between Georgia and South Ossetia, but it was too late. What Turkey is today trying to do is to keep the crisis, which entered its second phase with the military intervention by an overconfident Russia, from growing beyond a Georgian-Russian crisis. Turkish diplomacy is exerting its best efforts to prevent this crisis from developing into a US-Russian conflict, or, worse yet, a Russia-NATO conflict that would radically affect Turkey as a NATO member.

With the Caucasus initiative, Turkey is trying to keep this crisis from taking on new and more dangerous aspects and, at the same time, from it migrating to the Black Sea and triggering a new Nagorno-Karabakh problem between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Under this unwavering policy, Turkey is fulfilling all of its responsibilities stemming from the Montreux Convention on the one hand, and it is opposing efforts to make the Black Sea a NATO-controlled body of water, taking Russian concerns into account in this respect.

With the Caucasus initiative, Turkey is attempting to contain the emergent crisis within the borders of the region and to build confidence among regional countries. Turkey is acting with the awareness that all countries should win under this project. Turkey estimates that with this initiative, Russia will be happy to contain the crisis to the region where it is the dominant power; Georgia will reassert its territorial integrity; Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh problem can be discussed again in diplomatic terms; and Armenia can save itself from isolation by developing its relations with Turkey. Certainly, this is no easy project, but it is not utopian, either.

I will discuss this topic further in my next article...
