
Is Turkey Getting Away From The US In Caucasus ?

By Sedat Laciner

Journal of Turkish Weekly - 1/9/2008

It was easy to see the panic and anxiety of American and European leaders on their faces, while the Russian forces were keep going within the borders of Georgia. Yet, along with a difference: Americans were thinking about how to punish Russia whereas, French and German leaders' aim was how to stop Russia without incitement. The United States were felt embarrassed as it could not protect Georgia and wanted to find better options for punishing Russia as the way it deserved. On the other hand, the EU who admits Russia as a part of European House and is dependent on Moscow especially on energy issues had a core objective of appeasing Russia. In these circumstances, France, as the current EU president, has acted as an intermediary between the fighting countries and succeeded to convince Russia to sign the ceasefire agreement. Yet, the signed agreement was very ambiguous and open to interpretation that Russia could do whatever they want. Moreover, French President Sarkozy made a speech in Moscow that seems to legitimize the Russian attacks. It should be noted that the main barriers on Georgia's entrance to NATO had also been set by France and Germany in the previous NATO Summit.

There are plenty of experts who labeled German Ministry of Foreign Affairs as "Pro-Russian". Shortly France and Germany, two main countries of the EU, is very soft and ineffective against Russia during the crisis.

The United States wanted to expand the American military power in the region after the war has commenced. Americans endeavored to have at least the air dominance on Georgian air space. But this idea was immediately rejected by France and Germany. Nevertheless, there was one more country surprisingly rejects the Americans: Turkey!

A Proposal Excludes America: "Caucasus Platform"

Turkey reacted similar to the EU rather than the US right after the war erupted. Ankara neither aimed to punish Russia, nor spent effort for it. Contrarily, it tried to prevent America's or another country's (like Ukraine) intervention to the war by not allowing the armed cargo or warplanes of these countries while Russia and Georgia were fighting. Both Prime Minister Erdogan and President Gul did not have even the anxiety that EU leaders have. Surprisingly the Turkish leaders considered the issue like the problem of Syria-Israel which is not that much related to Turkey so that Turkey could only be the negotiator.

The suggestion firstly called "Caucasus Alliance" and then converted to "Caucasus Platform" surprisingly propounded by Prime Minister Erdogan confused the Americans at most. The Secretary of State of the US said that they had no idea about the project and it is surprising for them. Matt Bryza, US deputy assistant secretary of the state for European and Eurasian affairs, said "I must say I was surprised. I hadn't been briefed that that was going to happen. We have a partnership with Turkey on the Caucasus, and I presume that we'll be able to work together very closely now with Turkey and other allies since we do have clearly shared interests, not to mention values, throughout the Caucasus with Turkey." What does it mean? It obviously means that the US was unable to work together closely with Turkey and other allies regarding the Georgia issue. The main surprising issue for Turkish side is offering the "Caucasus Platform" to Russia at first. In other words, Ankara is not making an offer to her most important ally in Caucasus, but to Moscow which invades the Georgia with armed forces.

Another surprise related to Turkey-US relations about Caucasus Platform (or Alliance) proposal is Erdogan's and other authorities' repeated underlining that this cooperation should be "geographical based". Moreover, the repeated words include that the project covers five countries. When the project depends on "geographical base" Russia will be part of it for sure. Besides Russia will be the main actor. The United States could not be part of it, absolutely neither the EU. Turkey will fairly go into the Caucasus region with huge Russia and three small countries (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia). Furthermore, out of these small countries Georgia is in intense suffering under Russian pressure, and Armenia is capitulated by Russia voluntarily. In other words, Turkey's proposal excludes the United States from the region whereas includes Russia too much. It is more likely that the Americans were especially kept out. Because if it is really considered as "geographical based" Iran should be included. But it is reported as "5 countries" and Iran is not listed.

It apparently shows that Georgia crisis brings new tension points to the Turkey-US relations. Turkey has a fear of that the United States might ruin Caucasus like Iraq or Afghanistan with using Georgia as a cover. Ankara is convinced that Russia will appease with a little compensation. Ankara does not want to break the relations with Russia because of Georgia. It is easy to understand Turkey's concerns because there is a claim says the total trade volume will reach up to \$38 billion between two countries. Another possibility is Russia's alterable perspective to the PKK which may cause new terrorist attacks in Turkey. A little negative attitude of Russia would put Turkey in economic and politic trouble. As a matter of fact Russia is very happy with Turkey's attitude. During Erdogan's visit to Moscow both Putin and Medvedev showed him a special respect and bid farewell to him until he departs. Thus, it seems that Erdogan administration saves Turkish-Russian relations for now. However, Turkish-American relations seek for new tensions.

Cost of Approach to Russia

Saving the relations with Russia is fine; however, there is the other side of the coin. Turkey does not want the United States to start a new war in the region; yet, has to accept that Russia has started it. Secondly, Russia is changing the borders in the region through use of force. Russia frankly declares that they don't recognize Georgian borders. Russia has already recognized the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Thus, Georgia will be three separate countries now. If "Acaristan" is included this and even if "Cevahiti Armenians" revolts, it requires to get ready for 5 countries. In other words, Turkey's strongest fear comes true; borders are changed by illegal ways.

The second important problem is Russia is not punished in Georgia. In this way, the possibility of impunity of new occupiers increases. NATO and the West even could not protect Georgia will not interfere to Russia in new problems. Russia's next target country in Caucasus, Black Sea, Eastern Europe and Middle Asia is not certain yet.

The third important problem is Russia's obvious damage on Turkey's interests. Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan line is almost broken. Georgia's step by step moving to Russian part means that Russia-Georgia-Armenia (even Iran) line is coming. If Turkey will not be included in this line, Turkey's connection with Turkish world is getting separated. Return of Russia to the region is noting another victory for Russia in Turkish-Russian struggle that continues since Ottoman era.

Turkey's moderate policy is fair. Not provoking Russia and protecting our national interests by not staying against Russia for American's adventures is reasonable. But we don't have to forget that Turkey, by itself, does not have

the power to stop Russia. Russia evaluates the proposals like "Caucasus Platform" as a piece of cake. This proposal does not have the characteristics that may stop Russia's local goals. On the other hand, excluding the West and being a part of a club only with Russia and three small countries is like entering a small cave with a huge bear. Turkey is neither Germany nor France. Russia is very close to us and Turkey must know at best that what Russia can do in the region.

Actually our recent history has many fresh memories regarding Russia. Supporting Armenian terror, behavior against the left-wing terror and PKK shows that Russia gave a huge damage to Turkey. Even the most threatened country during the World War II was not Nazi German, but Stalin's Russia. Russia outspokenly wanted Kars, Ardahan and the surroundings after the war. Besides this, Russia asked for supremacy rights and bases in the Bosphorus. As we know Turkey is rescued by the United States against the Soviets and took the all risks and settled down under the NATO umbrella in order to be saved against Russia. Now the victim is Georgia. Poland and Ukraine also feels the "bear's claw" very close. However Turkey is untroubled and thinks that they could persuade Russia, even build an alliance with Russia.
