
Azerbaijan's Dangerous Dance With Russia

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As Armenia and Turkey come close to normalizing ties, which will not only contribute to the stability of the volatile South Caucasus but also to relations between Ankara and Yerevan, Azerbaijan has taken a last minute stance that can only be perceived as an act of sabotage supported by Russia.

Turkish diplomatic sources are of the view that Russia was behind the last-minute snag created by Azerbaijan over Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. Russia has long benefited from the Azerbaijani-Armenian and Armenian-Turkish dispute. That dispute, however, has a serious potential to negatively affect ties between NATO allies Turkey and the US, too, because the US Congress has already made several attempts in the past decade to recognize the events of 1915 that took place during Ottoman Turkish rule as genocide of Armenians.

During his April 6-7 visit to Turkey, US President Barack Obama reiterated his election campaign pledge to recognize the events of 1915 as a genocide of Armenians, but stated that the US will not prevent Armenian-Turkish relations to progress. This was widely read as a message that Obama will not use the word "genocide" during his April 24 speech if he makes one. April 24 is regarded as the day mass killings of Armenians began in 1915.

There is a strong belief that if Obama had the intention of using the word "genocide" during his April speech, he would not have visited Ankara.

Turkey strongly denies genocide allegations and has warned the US for decades that if its Congress passes a resolution to this end and if a US president utters the word "genocide," it will irreparably damage relations between the two allies, which need each other in this volatile region of the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean.

But finally, Turkey, which has done nothing for decades apart from denying genocide allegations, came up with a proposal to Armenia in 2005 to set up a committee of historians to investigate the 1915 events while broadening its package of proposals to begin relations with its northeastern neighbour, Armenia.

That package includes a solution to the Nagornyy Karabakh dispute, an Azerbaijani territory with a predominantly Armenian population, an opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia that Turkey closed in 1993 after the Azerbaijani-Armenian dispute over Nagornyy Karabakh broke out, an opening of diplomatic ties with Armenia as well as the start of deliberations among historians of both countries on the genocide allegations.

However, with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's last-minute refusal to participate in the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) meeting held in Istanbul last week, it has become clear that Baku protests Ankara-Yerevan rapprochement before progress is made on Nagornyy Karabakh. Armenian-Turkish relations have once again been hijacked by the Baku-Yerevan dispute.

A former Turkish ambassador to the US who also served as the Turkish ambassador in Baku, Faruk Logoglu, is of the belief that although the Armenian-Turkish package of solutions will be beneficial for the whole

region, Turkey has neglected the public diplomacy aspect of the rapprochement.

"Turkish decision makers should have informed the parties in Parliament about the steps taken on improving ties with Armenia while the Turkish public should also have been informed to a certain extent," Logoglu said last Sunday during a roundtable discussion hosted by CNNTurk.

However, the question is whether the Aliyev administration in Baku really cares about public diplomacy and hence the reaction seen from his people.

Instead, Aliyev has apparently used his state-controlled media, which published last week anti-rapprochement stories citing the unresolved status of the Nagornyy Karabakh dispute, creating a last-minute snag to prevent a breakthrough in Armenian-Turkish relations.

Murat Mercan, a deputy from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and head of the parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee, noted on the same program that Turkey informed Baku about all bilateral talks that have taken place between Turkey and Armenia formally and informally over the past several years. Mercan's remarks raised question marks over the sincerity of Aliyev's decision to not attend the Istanbul gathering. He did not cite any reason for his absence from the event.

The reaction from Azerbaijan, which has already begun supplying gas to the European markets via Turkey, bypassing Russia, has forced Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to state on April 9 that the absence of a resolution between Armenia and Azerbaijan concerning the Nagornyy Karabakh dispute stands as an obstacle to ongoing negotiations for a normalization of ties between Armenia and Turkey.

This past week's developments indicate that behind Aliyev's negative stance, fuelling its own media and the public against Armenian-Turkish progress in relations, has been Russia, which has several benefits in sabotaging the arrival of stability in the Caucasus.

The implementation of the package long negotiated between Turkey and Armenia, with Azerbaijan being informed of almost all steps, has now been jeopardized by both Azerbaijan and Russia.

The US has been of the strong belief that implementing the Armenian-Turkish package soon will give US President Obama ammunition to fire back at Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives, and her supporters in their attempts to pass a resolution describing the 1915 events as a genocide of Armenians.

Instead of conditioning the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations on Nagornyy Karabakh, Turkey should unveil and implement the package. Such a policy will mark a big step in solving the Nagornyy Karabakh dispute.
