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# Conflict in Caucasus : risk or opportunity for Turkey?

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Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili shakes hands with Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan in the presidential residence in Tbilisi. A preliminary agreement to resolve the Georgian crisis is in place, but hostilities continue in the besieged Caucasian state, forcing Turkey to think about its priorities and face its dilemmas as a close ally of Georgia and with strategic ties to Russia.

The crisis began when Georgia attacked the separatist pro-Russian territory of South Ossetia on Aug. 7, sparking Russian retaliation. Scores of people have died in the fighting. Russian troops targeted not only the Georgian forces in South Ossetia but have also occupied parts of Georgia, including the Black Sea port of Poti. In sum Russia has repelled the Georgian attempt to seize back control of South Ossetia, which liberated itself from Tbilisi's rule in the 1990s.

Turkey cooperates with Georgia in the field of energy, and Turkey hopes to become an eventual energy hub for Europe via the gas and oil pipelines that pass through both countries. Turkey also provides the former Soviet Union country with critical military assistance and training. But it also has important ties with Russia. Russia is Turkey's foremost trading partner with a trade volume of an estimated \$30 billion this year, up from \$23 billion last year. Turkey is also a key importer of Russian natural gas, as experts estimate Turkish dependence on Russia for natural gas to be about 65 percent of the total.

Concerned over the escalation of the conflict, the Turkish government has had difficulty determining the correct response to the crisis. Professor Mensur Akg n, who lectures on international relations at  stanbul's K lt r University, said nobody was prepared for Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili to make such a move.

'Nobody could guess that Saakashvili would defy the Russian giant; attacking South Ossetia means attacking Russia,' he told Sunday's Zaman.

He said it was therefore not unusual for Turkey to be in an initial state of limbo, as no foreign relations expert in the world could have predicted such an act from Saakashvili. 'Turkey has followed a healthy policy by not supporting one side over the other,' Akg n added.

Another seasoned observer of the region, Paul Goble, director of research at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy in Baku, agreed. 'I don't think Turkey could have intervened earlier and prevented this. Indeed, I think the one thing Turkey could have done and still can do is to provide genuine expertise to the new and often inexperienced governments on how to read what the West and especially what the Americans say. More established regimes know how to balance what Washington says diplomatically with what it says publicly and politically. Had Georgia been able to do that, it might have avoided this problem,' he explained to Sunday's Zaman via e-mail from the United States.

After initial calls for an end to hostilities, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoġan made a surprise move and flew to Russia and Georgia on Wednesday, calling on Russian and Georgian leaders to heed his proposal for a Caucasus pact. Erdoġan said such a regional platform would play a key role in preventing similar clashes in the future. He said it would also include crisis management mechanisms based on principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Saakashvili backed the idea, saying it would be beneficial to create a common security mechanism in the region. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin also welcomed the proposal, and Erdoğan said after talks in Moscow that the foreign ministries of the two countries would start working on the idea. 'Regional peace and welfare must be secured via cooperative projects that reflect common sense and mutual interests, not sentimentalism, clashes and tensions,' he said.

Akşın said this is the kind of role that Turkey can play in the region, similar to what it does in the Middle East. 'Since the mid-2000s, Turkey has become a force for solutions rather than problems.' He offered the example of the Turkish-mediated indirect talks between Israel and Syria.

According to Goble, Turkey has some enormous opportunities but faces some enormous risks as well in the wake of the Russian aggression in Georgia.

'Its opportunities include establishing far closer ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia and assuming the role of a major regional power. Its risks include falling into the trap of a 'cooperative' venture with Moscow, something that would tie Ankara's hands, forcing it to sacrifice its interests to Russia's,' he said.

Goble added that it is important to recognize that Russia miscalculated even more than Georgia. 'The frozen conflicts have been internationalized, Russia has suffered a black eye diplomatically, Georgia has left the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] and will get into NATO as will Ukraine, and other countries in the region will become more independent of Moscow as well,' he stated.

Turkey's EU membership, energy deals threatened?

Turkey sits in a volatile region bordering Iran, Syria, Iraq and former Soviet republics. It wants to join the European Union, but some EU states' hesitation to expand the bloc up to the Caucasus may have increased due to the Georgian-Russian conflict.

Amanda Akşakoca, a policy analyst at the Brussels-based European Policy Centre, said this is a chance for Turkey to show those in the EU -- the French president in particular -- the strong role that Turkey can play through taking a lead peacekeeping role.

'Erdoğan should be in regular touch with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Javier Solana [high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, secretary-general of the Council of the European Union] so they can work on a solution together,' she stated.

She also said this should serve as a warning regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. 'Nagorno-Karabakh is only a short distance from the key Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan [BTC] oil pipeline, where both Baku and Yerevan have been increasing their defense spending. Turkey could play a far greater role here, again together with the EU, before Nagorno-Karabakh also blows up in the world's face.'

Since Turkey severed its ties with neighboring Armenia in the early 1990s in protest of the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Georgia has become a valuable outlet for Turkey to reach the Caucasus and Central Asia.

According to Akşakoca, the EU will have increasingly close ties to and responsibility for countries in the Caucasus regardless of Turkish

membership, but will be far better placed to deal with them with a strong Turkey.

Turkey has worked hard to become a transit route for Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas exports as Europe tries to reduce its dependence on Russia. But Russia's invasion of Georgia has raised doubts about the security of oil and gas pipelines that cross Georgia and the wisdom of further investment in the pipelines.

Necdet Pamir, board member of the World Energy Council's Turkish National Committee, worries about whether transit lines through Georgia will remain secure in the long run and whether additional foreign investment will be safe. 'The Russians have demonstrated their military capability of getting very close to the pipelines, and they have shown that they can easily blockade Georgia,' he said.

Pamir said that if the gas and oil pipelines are closed, Turkey's losses would total up to \$12 million per day.

James L. Williams, publisher of the Energy Economist newsletter, was blunt about the possible repercussions of the conflict. 'The Georgian president brought in the whole pipeline issue probably to send more worries to the West, and especially to European consumers, so as to draw more attention to the conflict,' he said. 'It's not that we should ignore it, but it's certainly not a reason to panic.'

Turgut G r, co-chairman of the Turkish-Russian Business Council, said he is not too worried as he believes that the risk will be limited to short-term effects only. He mentioned that trucking had been temporarily impacted. He said that both Russia and Georgia were important countries for Turkey, adding that 'we can't choose one over the other.' He noted that Russia values Turkey and is aware of what an important role Turkey plays in the region.

The 1,000-mile BTC pipeline represents the core of Turkey's economic interests in Georgia; it can carry up to 1 million barrels a day of crude from the Azerbaijani coast on the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Turkey to the port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea. The BTC is owned by a consortium of companies. It was expected to carry more than 900,000 barrels of oil a day this month for export, bypassing routes that would have taken the oil through Russia and subjected it to that country's transit fees.

Deliveries through the BTC pipeline were halted on Aug. 4 after a fire was sparked along the Turkish portion of the route. The outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) claimed responsibility for the incident. BP also shut down a smaller line, the Western Route Export Pipeline, which was recently overhauled. It can carry up to 160,000 barrels of oil a day from Baku to the Georgian Black Sea port of Supsa. As a precaution, BP also shut down the South Caucasus gas pipeline, which transports natural gas from the Azerbaijani city of Baku through Georgia into Turkey. That gas is not exported.

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