
Spontaneous Solution Aboard A Plane For Caucasus Crisis

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The crisis in the Caucasus, despite all the problems and risks it poses to countries of the region, has also opened the way for new solutions such as the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, an idea that emerged from the brainstorming of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ali Babacan during a flight to Moscow on Aug. 13, where they planned to discuss the recent crisis between Russia and Georgia.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform is a concept that was first proposed in 2000 but became more relevant and was turned into an official initiative after the efforts of Turkish diplomacy during the peak of the crisis in the Caucasus in August.

The platform is planned to bring together Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia to find constructive ways to resolve crises in the troubled Caucasus.

When Russia and Georgia fought a brief war following a Georgian offensive in the breakaway region of South Ossetia, both Erdogan and Babacan were on vacation, but they decided to travel to Moscow to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis, diplomatic sources said. Their plane departed from Bodrum, a popular Turkish holiday resort, and during this flight Erdogan and Babacan decided to launch an initiative for the platform.

Turkey's aim is to create a solution mechanism in which the relevant parties will be able to gather around the same table. Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia are warm to the idea. Georgia, however, has demanded that before it agrees to join, Russia must first fulfill its cease-fire obligations.

The US administration was skeptical about the platform at the beginning but after Turkish diplomats explained what they are aiming to do and after a long telephone conversation between Babacan and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the US administration changed its stance and now is at least neutral to the initiative, diplomatic sources noted.

For Armenia, since its border with Iran is mountainous and not suitable for transportation and the border with Turkey is closed, its main trading partner is Georgia, but during the war, the scarcity of goods was felt in the landlocked country. Yerevan recognized that delaying a resolution of problems could create bigger problems. Azerbaijan took a similar lesson from the crisis; it was able to see that its main oil export route, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, was at risk and that sudden developments could occur in Nagorno-Karabakh similar to what happened in South Ossetia. According to sources familiar with the platform, the war in South Ossetia led Azerbaijan and Armenia to reconsider their problems, and it would not be surprising if the negotiation process between Yerevan and Baku accelerates after the elections in Azerbaijan in October.

Armenia warms to 'genocide commission'

The developments between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the warm atmosphere that emerged after President Abdullah Gul's visit to Yerevan on Sept. 6 for a soccer game between the two countries' national teams may lead to a new phase in Turkey-Armenia relations, too. Diplomatic sources familiar with developments in the Caucasus underlined that during Gul's visit, the Turkish side got the impression that Armenia is more open and ready to show a

stronger political will regarding research into the 1915 events which Armenians claim amount to genocide. Ankara is more optimistic now that Armenia could agree to establish a joint commission to study this period. The same sources point out that in addition to the commission of historians, other commissions such as one to improve cultural ties or economic cooperation may come to the agenda, but, of course, these developments will take time.

The sources recalled that there were meetings between high-ranking diplomats of Turkey and Armenia and that these meetings have opened the way to regular meetings in the future. There will be a meeting between the foreign ministers of Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, probably on the sidelines of this month's UN General Assembly in New York.

Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in a show of solidarity with Azerbaijan, a Turkic-speaking ally that was fighting Armenian-backed separatists over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. A solution to that dispute is seen as crucial to any move to establish diplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia.
