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# New Regional Parameters - Possible Outcomes Of Armenian-Turkish Border Opening

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Regional and international were abuzz last week regarding potential developments in negotiations aimed at normalizing relations between Armenia and Turkey. Public opinion was not only focused on the possible opening of the border between Armenia and Turkey, closed for the past fifteen years, an event that would herald a new era in relations between the neighboring states, but also what such an eventuality would mean for regional politics in general.

Such developments could lead to a shift in the existing regional power balance. These developments are quite contradictory and proceeding with such speed that they can lead to unforeseen consequences.

Regardless of whether the border is opened within the predicted timeframe, sometime in April, or not, the issue is on today's political agenda. Thus, let us attempt to make some predictions on the matter.

1. The opening of the Armenian-Turkish border will expand Armenia's political role in the region. By imparting a number of theoretical benefits to Armenia, it will afford greater manoeuvrability to Armenia in its foreign affairs. The border opening will strike a blow to the number one trump card held by Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict settlement process - to keep Armenia in a blockade since it still hasn't agreed to make concessions regarding the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

According to reports circulating in the press, Ankara is attempting to include a point regarding the Karabakh conflict in the Armenian-Turkish agreement it is planning but Yerevan is stubbornly showing its resistance on the issue. Due to a correct exercise of politics Yerevan truly possesses the possibility to neutralize Baku's only effective and essential trump card when it comes to the Karabakh conflict.

2. The opening of the border will spur the further deepening of the strategic partnership between Tbilisi and Baku. Baku isn't concealing its negative reaction to the thaw between Armenia and Turkey and has recently seen fit to even make direct threats to Ankara. Last week, for example, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, during a conversation with a third party, threatened to cut off gas supplies to Turkey if Ankara went ahead and signed a separate agreement with Armenia and opened the border without coming to some prearranged understanding regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. It already has been widely publicized that President Aliyev will not participate in the "Civilizations Alliance" forum to be held in Istanbul on April 6-7. This refusal to participate is yet another sign intended to show Baku's displeasure regarding unfolding developments.

"If the border is opened before the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, it would run counter to Azerbaijan's national interests," stated Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov.

Georgia is the second country whose interests are opposed to the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border. After the Georgian-Russian conflict of August, 2008, analysts have openly started to talk about the uncertainty surrounding Georgia as a transit country for projects with a strategic importance directed towards the West.

Now too, western analysts don't conceal the new possibilities that the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border might have regarding the implementing of energy-related projects towards the West.

In addition to the huge economic and political dividends reaped by Georgia due to the energy supply routes that transverse its territory, the lion's share of Armenia's foreign trade, even that with Turkey, passes through Georgia. Thus, as stated by Jemal Inaishvili, President of Georgia's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, "The restoration of a direct route will definitely impact on Georgia's economy." Despite the fact that Inaishvili welcomes the wish of the two nations to establish normal relations, nevertheless, he believes that, "The restoration of direct links between Armenia and Turkey will lead to specific economic losses for Georgia". This will include a visible drop in cargo flows that will in turn negatively impact on the ports of Batumi and Poti.

Naturally, all this will impel Baku and Tbilisi to seek out alternative routes of cooperation. Last week in Tbilisi the foreign ministers of the two nations signed a document regarding joint political programs. It's not by chance that reports have recently surfaced in the Azerbaijani press signalling the continuation of Georgian-Azerbaijani collaboration. As stated by Fridon Todua, deputy speaker of the Georgian parliament and chairman of The Parliamentary Group of Friendship with the Republic of Azerbaijan, in an interview with Day.Az, "despite the resistance of Armenia, it is impossible to stop implementation of the project (Baku, Tbilisi, Kars railway), since it has already started."

3. The opening of the border will spur the deepening of cooperation between Baku and Moscow. Baku, in its relations with its strategic partner, will try to compensate for the "crisis" through new arrangements with Moscow. Russia has been trying to woo Baku for a long time, forcing Azerbaijan to give up on new projects aimed at Western energy independence. And on March 27, a mutual understanding agreement was signed between Azprom and Azerbaijan's State Oil Company that calls for the long-term supply of gas at market prices.

At the same time a telephone conversation took place between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Azerbaijani President Aliyev on April 3. According to official reports, the two leaders discussed the G-20 Summit, the global economic crisis and other issues of mutual concern. Azerbaijani news outlets, however, report that issues related to the Karabakh conflict was also touched on in the conversation.

4. The opening of the Armenian-Turkish border will also strengthen Washington's position in the South Caucasus. In particular, Washington's active role of late in the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations has laid the groundwork for this. While it is a fact that Washington has long abandoned implementing its political agenda in the post-Soviet arena via Ankara, preferring to do so directly, new developments can restore this erstwhile significance of Turkey in the eyes of Washington.

In the words of Matthew Bryza, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia would "create a new and positive dynamic" in relations across the region, "as well as in developing the economic and transport links we have been pursuing ever since the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

The United States is pretty limited when it comes to exerting direct influence over Armenia. What prevents it from doing so is the Russian political, military and economic presence in Armenia. In the event that the border is opened, Washington will be given the possibility to

expand its influence in Armenia to a certain degree via Ankara. Moreover, by coming forth as the primary mediator in the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations, the United States automatically gets to hold a more active playing card in the Karabakh conflict settlement, the next logical step in the progression of these relations.

To this must be added the fact that Turkish-American cooperation in the South Caucasus will also assist in the rebuilding of mutual confidence between the two nations, yielding possibilities of cooperation in other matters as well, i.e. Iraq and Afghanistan.

5. At the same time, the border opening will assist the development of Russian-Turkish relations. Turkey, which has traditionally competed with Russia for dominance in the region, is still buoyed by the same tradition but has taken into account the Russian factor in the post-Soviet territories. Thus, future cooperation between Ankara and Moscow is inevitable, particularly in terms of Armenia. In reality, the possibilities of Russian-Turkish cooperation are even greater when the "Armenian link" comes into the picture. Glaring testimony of this was the agreement reached last year that called for the sale of Armenian electricity to Turkey. It's another question as to what extent the interests of the "link" will be taken into account.

6. The opening of the border will lead to the necessity of greater scope and specificity of the Armenian-Iranian partnership. There has been no official reaction from Tehran regarding recent Armenian-Turkish developments. It is clear nonetheless that Tehran has remained on the sideline of regional processes ever since the developments subsequent to last year's war between Georgia and Russia. As strange as it may seem, Armenian-Iranian cooperation will assume greater significance after the border is opened between Armenia and Turkey. Armenia has traditionally viewed Iran as a counterweight to Turkey and in this matter it can even play a more effective role than Russia.

While true that the Iran-Armenia railway agreement reached on April 4 can't be viewed in this context as a long-range step, nevertheless, regardless of the suspicions as to its economic viability, the project can assume important political significance in the near future. Thus, Yerevan will obtain greater flexibility in terms of foreign policy with the deepening of cooperation with Iran. What remains is to ensure the actual implementation of Armenian-Iranian joint projects.

The opening of the border between Armenia and Turkey can thus lead to genuine changes for the region as a whole. A situation can be created in which everyone is cooperating with everyone else and where each player is doing so with the aim of protecting its national interests. Armenia can emerge as the main "hero" in all these developments and, as a result, it can be confronted with new challenges as well as possibilities. The greatest benefit from this new situation will only be culled due to a specifically well-crafted political policy that is flexible at the same time.

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