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# ANALYSIS : « Fire in neighbour's house » has Turkey on edge

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ANKARA, Aug 12 (Reuters) - The conflict between Russia and Georgia threatens to undermine NATO member Turkey's ambitions to become an energy hub and could exacerbate misgivings among EU states about expanding the bloc right up to the Caucasus.

The fighting over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, which has unsettled oil markets, is another reminder of the strategic importance of Turkey, a country that wants to join the European Union and sits in a volatile region bordering Iran, Syria, Iraq and former Soviet republics.

With no energy resources of its own, 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.

Those prospects, along with Ankara's desire for a stable neighbourhood on its restive eastern flank, could suffer a setback as the hostilities between Moscow and Tbilisi highlight fragile security in the Caucasus, analysts said.

"The East-West energy corridor and Turkey being an energy hub for the West is one of the principal arguments of Turkey in its application for the EU and the need to have a good relationship with Turkey," said Hugh Pope, senior analyst at International Crisis Group.

"This conflict casts a shadow over Turkey's foreign policy platform of creating an area of stability."

Along with neighbour Georgia, Turkey hosts the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which brings 1 million barrels per day of Azeri oil to Turkey's Mediterranean coast for Western export.

It also hopes to host parts of the European Union-backed Nabucco pipeline, expected to be operational in 2013.

Confidence in the pipelines' security was dented last week when Kurdish separatists claimed responsibility for an explosion that started a fire on the Turkish section of the BTC pipeline.

## EU CAUCASUS BORDER

Analysts said the simmering conflict, which erupted last Thursday when Georgia suddenly sent forces to retake South Ossetia, was likely to revive debate over whether to admit a country like Turkey into the European Union.

"This conflict could strengthen the argument for the West that if Turkey is outside the tent it could create a lot of difficulties for the EU," said William Hale, an expert on Turkey who teaches at Istanbul's Sabanci University.

"So from the EU point of view it would make sense to bring Turkey into the tent," said Hale.

But Wolfango Piccoli, an analyst at the Eurasia Group consultancy, said the argument could well run the other way.

"There is also a concern that if Turkey is part of the EU you are bringing the EU's border to Georgia and to the rest of the Caucasus, which might not go well in continental Europe."

Summing up Turkey's growing unease over the developments in Georgia, a Turkish Foreign Ministry official put it this way:

"We want stability in the region and to see fighting stop as soon as possible. There is fire in the neighbour's house."

For Hale, who has written several books on Turkey, Turkey finds itself again caught up in a tangle of difficult geopolitical considerations due to its crossroads location.

A member of NATO and an ally of the United States, Turkey has seen historically uneasy ties recently improve with resurgent Russia, which is an important trading partner for Ankara with trade worth \$19.9 billion in the first half of 2008, according to official figures.

But it also supports Georgia and has a vested interest in seeing Caucasus states step out of Russia's sphere of influence. Last week, it agreed to a request from Georgia to supply the country with electricity amid the conflict.

Wary of infuriating Russia, from which it buys about 60 percent of the gas it consumes, Turkey has been careful not to back Georgia's bid to join NATO, which Russia opposes.

"Turkey doesn't want this war but it has had a difficult job adjusting its foreign policy towards Russia and Georgia," Hale said. "There are broader strategic considerations in this conflict. Turkey needs to be cautious."

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