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BAKU PARADE WHISPERS GEOPOLITICAL COMPLEXITIES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

RAHIM RAHIMOV

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EXPERT OPINION

საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Parade

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan attended a military parade in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku on December 10 to celebrate Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the war over the Karabakh region that ended with the Russia-brokered armistice on November 9-10. The Russian historian, Andrey Zubov, describes the Baku parade as an occasion "rather to celebrate the birth of a new geopolitical alliance than the victory over Armenia"[1]. Following the parade, Russia imposed a ban on tomato imports from Azerbaijan in its flagship manner and Russian peacekeepers attempted to do something around the town of Shusha in Karabakh resembling what they have done in Georgia: "borderization". Azerbaijani state TV, other media outlets and public figures widely and explicitly condemned such behavior of the Russian peacekeepers as a jealous response to the parade demonstration of Armenia's Russian-made weapons and military equipment captured by the Azerbaijani armed forces or destroyed using Turkish-made Bayraktar drones[2]. Erdogan and the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, watched Turkish soldiers march alongside with Azerbaijanis on the central streets of Baku to the joy of local residents who took to the streets despite the COVID-19 related restrictions in order to salute them. This scene shows a major Russian weakness vis-à-vis Turkey in Azerbaijan. Unlike Moscow, whose perception in Azerbaijan is controversial, Ankara enjoys nation-wide support. Recently leaked Russian secret files reveal that it is much more difficult for Moscow to develop pro-Russian civil society organizations and soft power instruments in Azerbaijan than even in staunchly pro-Western Georgia[3].

Russia-France versus Turkey-UK

Erdogan's attendance at the parade in Baku also resonated internationally because of his statements. First, he took the opportunity to lash out at the French President, Emmanuel Macron, while praising "Vladimir Putin's positive approach" to take the Karabakh conflict settlement in a "positive direction." From the first days of the outbreak of the Karabakh war, Russian state TV channels featured on-air politicians and experts who accused London of instigating the war from behind the scenes. Firebrand Russian politician, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, depicted the Armenians, the Azerbaijanis and the Turks as "cannon fodder" for British interests. Recently, Chief of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergey Naryshkin, accused "some Western nations" of attempting to subvert the Putin-brokered Karabakh truce. A leading Russian newspaper, *Kommersant*, quoted unnamed sources

in Russian state authorities to highlight "Great Britain specifically" among them[4]. Moscow looked more aligned with Paris as high-level communications between Ankara and London intensified during the Karabakh war. BP's regional president for Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey sent a letter to the Azerbaijani government to support the nation in its "efforts in restoring the country`s territorial integrity"[5]. Thus, Moscow is concerned over what it regards as the burgeoning ties of two non-EU NATO allies –the UK and Turkey. Such concerns are exacerbated by London's announcement of a sharp rise in the military budget. The fact that both Ankara and London move to enhance their partnership in the military-security sphere with Ukraine, in particular, adds fuel to the concerns of Moscow. The Azerbaijani military success in the latest Karabakh war is oftentimes attributed to the role of Turkey as its senior ally. Such attribution could lead Tbilisi and Kyiv to seeking similar senior allies or partners to reclaim their own lost territories. Georgia and Ukraine's traditional senior partners such as Germany, France and the USA tend to maintain the status quo in order not to provoke Russia. As a result, Georgia and Ukraine are not very satisfied with them. Therefore, Ankara and London are interested to step in to fill the gap[6,7]. Moscow, of course, is preoccupied to address such scenarios in the case that they start materializing.

Turkey Wins, Iran Loses

Second, Erdogan recited a few lines from an Azerbaijani national folk song in his address at the parade leading to a diplomatic scandal between Ankara and Tehran with the latter perceiving it as a claim on Iranian territory. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, reacted harshly on his Twitter account. The Turkish ambassador was summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry and was told that "the era of territorial claims and warmongering and expansionist empires was over"[8]. Tehran's furious reaction to Erdogan's recital of the poem is caused by two factors. On the one hand, Azerbaijani public enthusiasm over Erdogan's recital indicates a harsh reality for Iran: Sunni Turkey's soft power and friendly perception, unlike that of Shiite Iran, are on the rise with a new tempo in Shiite-majority Azerbaijan following the Karabakh war. The poem also resonated with Iran's multimillions of ethnic Azerbaijanis some of who showed sympathy on social media. Iran had already been concerned over the joy of Iranian Azerbaijanis over their northern brethren's military victory in Karabakh. On the other hand, the fact that Iran was kept offside during the brokering of the Karabakh truce infuriates Tehran. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said that "the normalization of Azerbaijan-Armenia ties" would have a negative impact on Iran's transit capacity, especially in

the period of international sanctions. Therefore, Russia is "aware of Iran's concerns" over the Karabakh peace accord[9]. Under the Russia-brokered truce accord, regional blockades are to be removed and a corridor is to be established to link mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave via Armenian territory. This would also connect Azerbaijan to Turkey by a much shorter route than the existing one via Iran. If the implementation of the accord progresses well, Soviet-era transportation infrastructures and routes would be rehabilitated between Armenia and Azerbaijan. All of these mean that Iran's significance as a transit country for Armenia, Azerbaijan as well as Turkey will be significantly diminished.

Georgia in a Discomfort Zone

Third, Erdogan stated that "Putin welcomes" his initiative to form a six-party Caucasus cooperation platform of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia and Turkey[10]. Tehran, however, was so infuriated over the poem that it just ignored the call for cooperation. Since the role of Iran as a transit country is diminished, so is its potential for extracting benefits from this kind of cooperation. The six-party platform also involves Georgia at least hypothetically. Georgia's perspective on that is not unambiguous. Georgia's transit potential is to be negatively affected in case the relevant provisions of the truce accord are implemented, particularly those related to the removal of the blockades. Likewise, the six-party platform would siphon off potential investments and projects towards Armenia in future.

A silver lining for Georgia in this context is that Tbilisi will feel more relaxed in advancing its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Previously, Tbilisi had to seek an awkward balancing act between Baku and Yerevan in order to minimize risks. Incidentally, Tbilisi has called for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to cooperate in a trilateral format. It is unclear whether or not Tbilisi sees the trilateral cooperation as autonomous or within the six-party platform. It is also uncertain if Georgia might want to cooperate with Russia or categorically not within this platform. For a comparison, Azerbaijan itself had rejected any cooperation with Armenia throughout the three decades of the conflict. Likewise, Georgia may reject cooperating with Moscow in line with its demands from the latter to leave its breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Thus, a challenge for Tbilisi is that Moscow could have a Georgian consideration in the latest Karabakh deal: Georgia's even relatively diminished significance for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey may highlight its increased

need for improved ties with Russia. It would grow even more challenging for Georgia to remain as an aspiring bastion of Western values surrounded by neighbors which are Russian, pro-Russian, non-Western or West-skeptic. Such a discomfort zone would require Georgia to behave delicately in order to minimize its almost inevitable hobbling in the region.

Russian-Turkish Cooperative Rivalry

Moreover and more importantly, Moscow's and Ankara's motives behind the six-party platform could differ drastically. Moscow is likely to want to use the platform for the integration of at least some of its individual members, such as Azerbaijan, into the Russia-centric Eurasian Economic Union. But Ankara's intention may be diametrically opposite to that of Moscow - to pull the Central Asian Turkic countries into its orbit. For so many years, Baku has refrained from Eurasian Union membership on the ground that it cannot enter into an alliance or a bloc with Armenia. All of these ambiguities and controversies promise a period of uneasy tendencies for the Caucasus region.

In the meanwhile, Ankara and Moscow have reportedly agreed on the details of the Russian-Turkish joint peace center to observe the Karabakh truce. Jointly composed of Russian and Turkish servicemen, the center will use drones and technical equipment for the truce observation. It is to be located in Azerbaijan's Agdam district that was vacated by the Armenian forces as part of the truce accord and that is close to the major Armenian-populated city of Stepanakert/Khankendi[11]. The Turkish presence and drone control in the center would allow for ensuring that the Russian peacekeepers do not have a kind of the free walk that they have enjoyed in Georgia and detecting if any suspicious or threatening movements take place in a timely manner. This is yet to be practically implemented on the ground. How the performance of the Russian-Turkish joint peace center and its impact on the balance of power would reverberate in practical terms on the ground will be important for the drawing of a final contour on the emerging new geopolitical status-quo in the region.

Debates over the Karabakh war and the related Russian-Turkish balance of power in the region are ongoing. Experts and pundits disagree over a number of issues. In particular, there is a conundrum over the restrained behavior of Moscow during the war and the new Turkish profile in the region. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, rejected "euphoria" or "hysteria" over Russia's notional loss of the Caucasus to Turkey[12]. Nevertheless, Matthew Bryza, the former US Ambassador to Azerbaijan and the ex-US co-

chair of the OSCE Minsk Group tasked with the Karabakh conflict settlement, regards the Turkish presence in Azerbaijan advantageous for NATO: "Turkey's involvement in the Caucasus politically and militarily is a good thing and I would argue that it is unequivocally a good thing for NATO"[13]. The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, attributed Turkey's rising role in Azerbaijan to "geopolitical ramifications of the breakdown of the Soviet Union"[14]. The primary target of Putin's message may be a domestic or a foreign audience. Depending on that, the message could be interpreted in different but not necessarily mutually exclusive ways. If the target is the domestic audience, then he seeks justification for not being able to fully effectively counter Turkish penetration into the traditional Russian sphere of interest. If it is the foreign audience, then the message is to alert the West of Moscow's uneasy preference to cooperate with others, such as Turkey, China and Iran, in the post-Soviet space but no way with the West. This preference is also symptomatic of Russia's discomforting, painful and unwilling transition from its imperial past to a nation-state future.

Indeed, Turkey is more acceptable to Moscow than are the Western nations if for no other reason than that the presence of the West brings its values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law while Turkey relies on the ideas of common ethnic-linguistic origins and cultural and historical ties as well as the geographical neighborhood with the region. Moscow understands from its own experience with Slavic-Orthodox Ukraine and Orthodox Georgia that religious, ethnic and cultural ties are good but vulnerable and not crucial. Incidentally, in an interview with the Russian RBK TV, the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, alluded to Russia's experiences with Ukraine as well as Georgia saying that common ethnic-religious origins do not always lead to mutual support and trust but, on the contrary, sometimes to "war" or "intrigues against each other"[15]. Furthermore, Moscow sees Western values as threatening to potentially undermine "Russianness."

Turkey's priority seems to maximize a diversification of its foreign policy dealings and partnerships including with two great power rivals - Moscow and London. On top of that, Erdogan's statement regarding the six-party platform is rather aimed at the West in order to dissuade it from imposing heavier sanctions[16]. Indeed, the preliminary sanctions announced by the EU and the USA epitomize the dilemma of Washington and Brussels: "How to contain Turkey's aspiration to emancipate itself from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's shackles and become a more autonomous regional power without pushing Mr. Erdogan into Russia's arms"[17]. A broader observation is that Turkey's line to diversify its partnerships through controversial

dealings is a sign of de-centralization tendencies in the conventional Western transatlantic community and structures and not international multilateralism. Joe Biden's presidency will be struggling to cope with this trend.

A Glimpse of the South Caucasus and Local Geopolitics

In regard to the South Caucasus, the geopolitical configurations and the regional balance of power are being reshaped in the region with the Karabakh war and the related truce accord. External actors such as Russia and Turkey play a significant role. Armenia and Azerbaijan are directly engaged in this game but to varying degrees. Remaining outside of the game is not in the best interests of Georgia. Therefore, it should seek to contribute to the reshaping of the new situation by practicing a more active role; in particular, by trying to engage Armenia and Azerbaijan in a trilateral South Caucasian format. Therefore, Georgia has to reanimate its historic role in this new scene if for no other reason than that Tbilisi is the birthplace of the first republics of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Otherwise, someone else will fill the gap and this will leave Georgia with the risk of remaining further offside the game and the South Caucasus with a further risk to even fall apart.

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