

The Turkish Link of the East-West Corridor

Nigar Goksel - Editor in Chief, Turkish Policy Quarterly



The Geopolitical backdrop

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey's role in linking Central Asia and the Caucasus to Europe has been a significant element of Turkey's strategic value to the West. While for years enthusiasts of the integration of this sub-region with Europe in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey carried an expectation that Europe and the US would design and push forward the process, the last few years has seen a process of integration emerge between these three countries that is less dependent on a larger Euro-Atlantic initiative. One question this article tackles is why the expectations from external powers dimmed, and how, nevertheless, these three countries found the incentive and capacity to push forward with integration amongst themselves. The role of global and regional geopolitical fluctuations in the ebbs and flows of the realization of the East-West corridor are taken up in this context.

The seeds of the East-West corridor as it relates to Turkey can be traced to the early post-Soviet years when, as an extension of the Euro-Atlantic bloc, the vision of Turkey extending strategic reassurance to the Caucasus and Central Asia was conceptualized. The vision was such that being a strategic corridor would deliver Turkey strategic and economic dividends, consolidate the sovereignty and security of the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and strengthen the Trans-Atlantic position in the region. Hydrocarbons would flow westwards, bypassing Russia and Iran, and governance models would flow from Europe, fostering democracy, free markets, and the well being of the people in the Caucasus.

Turkey achieving EU candidate status in 1999 and the subsequent establishment of oil and gas pipelines from Baku through Tbilisi to Turkey were important milestones in this direction. However, many complications also arose - ranging from strained relations between Turkey and the US from 2003 onwards, a resurgent Russia in the neighborhood, shifts in Turkey's foreign policy priorities, and the EU falling short of the geopolitical muscle expected of it.

On the one hand Ankara's prioritization of relations with neighbors that began in the late 1990s and intensified after 2002, has driven more engagement with neighbors such as Azerbaijan and Georgia. However, the multi-vectoral nature of Turkey's new foreign policy also meant that the Euro-Atlantic dimension of Turkey's neighborhood

policies was toned down. Ankara's effort to intensify its relations with neighbors such as Iran and Russia both countered Euro-Atlantic interests in the region on occasion, and reduced Ankara's ability to serve as a play the role of a "counterbalance" in the Caucasus.

From the Iraq war onwards, tensions were introduced in Turkey-US relations, lasting throughout the Bush era. Ankara seemed to share with Tehran and Moscow, a deep suspicion of US penetration in the region. A leading factor affecting the geostrategic equilibrium of the region has been the real and perceived drop in US engagement in the region due to domestic economic difficulties, fatigue after the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions and withdrawal from these countries', and shift of attention to regions such as Asia-Pacific.

Moscow, consistently interested in curbing the speed and depth of the realization of the East-West corridor, has held leverages in the region to limit the penetration of Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus. From 2005 onwards, but particularly in the 2008-2011 period, Turkey arguably played into Moscow's hands on issues involving the Black Sea neighborhood. Two particular incidents highlighted this phenomenon. One was Turkey's objection to the extension of NATO's Operation Endeavor to the Black Sea in 2005. The other was Ankara's Russia-cautious response to the August War in 2008 and causing delay of US assistance to Georgia. While Ankara's logic was supposedly that its cooperation with Russia could bring win-win benefits to both, this was deemed unrealistic by critics in Baku and Tbilisi. The view in Tbilisi and Baku that Ankara could serve as a counterbalance to Russia in the region incurred serious blows in this period.

The strategic logic of the East-West corridor seemed quite undermined in 2009 when Alexander Petersen wrote:

“Due to sheer neglect from a fumbling European Union and a distracted United States, Ankara has decided there is more to gain by acting as a regional middleman than as a bridge. Under serious, constant threat from its north, Georgia has been all but left to its own devices. Azerbaijan - the bottleneck to Central Asia, the strategically vital overlap area in the concentric circles that are the greater Black Sea and Caspian regions - has been left to flirt with Moscow and Tehran, now offering prices for energy similar to those from Europe.”¹

While Turkey’s initiatives in the region that might undermine the East-West Corridor were at their height in the 2009-2011 period, the seeds for Ankara’s reality check were also sown. The Turkey-Armenia normalization process, which risked driving a wedge between Turkey and Azerbaijan derailed,² the limits of Turkey’s overlapping interests with Russia were re-discovered³, and Ankara’s efforts to forge a multi-lateral regional platform that would bring the Caucasus countries under the same umbrella as Turkey and Russia but exclude the West (the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform- CSCP) was stillborn.

Since 2011 there has been again an upsurge in the formation of a sub-region between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. A network of infrastructure composed of energy pipelines, roads, and railroads forms the backbone of the integration process between these three countries.

Despite the strategic recession of the US from the region, withdrawal from Afghanistan and the need to accordingly transport of military material and personnel, which can involve routes through Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia,

¹Alexandros Petersen, Progress on East-West Energy Corridor Continues , New Atlantcist, 9 June 2009
http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/progress-east-west-energy-corridor-continues

² Nigar Goksel, Turkish Policy Towards Caucasus: A Balance Sheet of the Balancing Act”, EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series 2011/1, November 2011,

³ Nigar Goksel, ”The dynamics of the Ankara-Moscow partnership in relation to the South Caucasus”, SAM, December 2012

continues to focus American interest to the region. While the EU remains strategically incoherent, countries such as Romania, Poland and Sweden are proactive in their aim to integrate this region with Europe. On Turkey’s end, downgraded relations with Russia and Iran, and challenges faced in its MENA oriented initiatives, have incentivized increased strategic collaboration with the Euro-Atlantic. Problems with Syria have been a driving force in this sense.

Linked by pipe and iron

In practice, the focus of the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan three-way integration is primarily based on energy and logistics/infrastructure.

The single most effective drive for sustained integration between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan has been Azerbaijan’s hydrocarbon wealth. The already existing oil and natural gas pipelines from Baku through Georgia to Turkey, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) render Azerbaijan’s fate entangled with that of these two countries. For the past decade, the focus has been on creating a Southern Corridor to European markets for Caspian natural gas.

Turkey’s need to reasonably priced natural gas and the strategic dividends for Turkey of being on the route of the Corridor for the gas reserves from Azerbaijan’s Shah Deniz II natural gas field to reach Europe have considerably incentivized Turkey to align with the East-West corridor vision.

For Azerbaijan, selling natural gas to Europe is not only an economic goal but also a safety net for sovereignty and strategic independence. Being a transit country on this corridor is also strategically very significant for Georgia, as it renders Azerbaijan, Turkey and European countries stakeholders in Georgia’s security. For Europe, reducing the energy dependence of some EU member states on Russia has been the primary concern.

While the preference of a dedicated pipeline to carry Azerbaijani gas to European markets had been on the agenda for almost a decade, by late 2011 it became obvious that the Nabucco option (an EU-backed project which was to run from Erzurum in Turkey to Baumgarten

in Austria), the trans-Anatolian natural gas pipeline project (TANAP) was born.

This agreement has invigorated Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, and kicked off “a new age of partnership.”⁴ It has also extended the strategic relevance of the region (Azerbaijan and Georgia in particular) for the West. The Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Washington DC highlighted the strategic vision of the regional integration this pipeline can foster as follows:

“The European Union was based on a coal union. Why? Because in order to have good ideas in your life, you need to have a warm home. What we have to establish in our region is the basis for cooperation and for expanding integration. Isn't that in the national interest of the U.S. and Europe as a whole?”⁵

Given the strategic value of this pipeline, involvement of the US in the actualization of this project has been dim, particularly compared to US strategic involvement in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan design phases in the late 1990s. The EU has also been passive, arguably due to a lack of coherence between its energy policy and its strategic outlook, and weak coordination among its member states in managing the EU's political relationships with the various potential supplier countries of the region.

In late June 2013, the decision between the two competitors for the delivery of Azerbaijani gas from the Turkish border to Europe was made. The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) won over Nabucco West. Thus the route will run via Greece and Albania and across the Adriatic Sea to southern Italy. This decision is seen as a “safe” one for Azerbaijan, as it ensures access to European markets but does not confront Moscow to the same extent that Nabucco West, which would have reduced the dependence on Gazprom of Bulgaria, Romania, Austria, Hungary.⁶

⁴ Zaur Shiriyev, The Caspian conundrum of TANAP, Today's Zaman, 3 July 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists-285380-the-caspian-conundrum-of-tanap.html>

⁵ Azeri ambassador to US lobbying for TANAP project, 25 October 2012, http://www.azernews.az/oil_and_gas/45376.html

⁶ Nona Mikhelidze, The Winner is TAP: The EU's Failed Policy in the South Caucasus, IAI Working Papers, 21 July 2013, <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=962>

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway Project underway since 2008 is an important component of trilateral integration. It is expected not only to contribute to the economic development of the three countries but also be a geopolitical asset for the East-West corridor. Albeit after a few delays, the pipeline is now set to be completed in 2014. It is therefore possible that this route can be used in the evacuation of some of the ISAF personnel and cargo from Afghanistan in 2014. With extensions foreseen in Turkey towards Europe and eastward across Central Asia, the larger vision is of the re-incarnation of the Silk Road from China to Europe. The railway has not been without controversy though, due to its implications for Armenians and for Moscow. The route both offers an alternative to the Trans-Siberian railway, with the potential to reduce the dependence of European countries on Russia, and it bypasses Armenia, thus preventing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from taking regional integration hostage. Due to its isolating affect on Armenia and the railway's potential role in weakening Russian leverage, the project may incentivize stronger counter-mobilization from other axes.

Looking ahead: Infrastructure versus vision

As Zaur Siriyev, editor in chief of Caucasus International, has pointed out, the “geopolitical romanticism” of the 1990s had led to “effective coordination between these states with support from US” but now, “given the shifting axis of global powers with interests in the region, in addition to the unstable regional dynamics with periodic spikes in tensions, the risk of renewed hostilities appears to impose limits on the fulfillment of the broader objectives of trilateralism.” He concludes that “any long-term prospects for the trilateral initiative hinge more on the economic underpinnings of the relationship.”⁷

Indeed, many of the potential weaknesses of the strategic alliance between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia as part of the East-West corridor are related to the vision question, and more distinctly to the absence of an agreed set of values or vision for the future. For this sub-region,

⁷ Zaur Shiriyev, Today's Zaman, Turkish, Azerbaijan and Georgian ‘trilateralism’, 7 April 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-311917-turkish-azerbaijan-and-georgian-trilateralism.html>

it is yet unclear whether the power of Europeanization will trump the “pull” of other models and geopolitical axes from Eurasia and the wider Middle East. Indeed, the opportunities and enthusiasm for European integration differs considerably between the parties and the vision for the future outlined by the political elite of the three countries is not necessarily congruent.

Since 2004, challenges have been added to Turkey’s EU accession process, related to Cyprus and to supposed “civilizational differences” perceived by European publics, particularly in countries such as Germany, France, and Austria. Enlargement fatigue in EU countries has been exacerbated by the economic crisis and the so-called leadership deficit. From 2007 onwards domestic power consolidation in Turkey has fed into a deadlock in Turkey-EU relations. Ankara’s preoccupation with being a regional leader in the MENA geography in recent years has arguably played into this dynamic in complex ways. The popularity of the EU and NATO in Turkish public opinion has also plummeted. Some believe that Turkey-EU relations will rejuvenate in 2013,⁸ other more recent opinions differ.⁹

Turkey is, perhaps naturally, preoccupied with the developments in the Arab world. Some Azerbaijani and Georgian elites can see Turkey’s activeness in this region as playing into its role in the Caucasus, by virtue of maintaining a central position vis-à-vis the West, indirectly contributing to the Western engagement in the Caucasus. However, Turkey’s being drained by this region, in political will and credibility, has been having the contrary effect. The political capital and public attention of Turkey being limited, little is available for the integration process with Azerbaijan and Georgia. When messages from Ankara signal a vision to be the leader of the Muslim Middle East, enthusiasm in Baku and Tbilisi about forming a bloc with Turkey are negatively impacted. Both Georgian and Azerbaijani elites occasionally have second thoughts

about relying on Turkey as much as they do without a clear sense of where Turkey is heading.¹⁰ However, even if Baku and Tbilisi opted for “diversifying” their strategic relations, and not relying so strongly on Turkey, their lack of alternatives to Turkey is also a reality.

Ultimately Turkey thrives on the same long term directions that the EU thrives on in the Caucasus and Central Asia: open borders, good governance, rule of law, free and fair economic competition, and the resolution of conflicts. These are also in the interests of Georgia and Azerbaijan. In this sense, it can seem inevitable that trilateral integration - at the expense of Tehran and Moscow- would proceed smoothly. However, short to mid term interests, priorities, and capabilities can prevent this this long-term perspective from being realized.

⁸Joost Lagendijk, Today’s Zaman, Turkey-EU relations slowly warming up (1), 6 January 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists-303171-turkey-eu-relations-slowly-warming-up-1.html>

⁹Yavuz Baydar, Al Monitor, 14 June 2013, Turkey–EU Relations May Be

A Casualty of Gezi Park, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/wounded-relations-turkey-eu-protests.html>

¹⁰Nigar Goksel, “[Turkish Policy Towards Caucasus: A Balance Sheet of the Balancing Act](http://www.edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black_Sea_Paper_Series1.pdf)”, EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series 2011/1, November 2011, http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black_Sea_Paper_Series1.pdf