

Turkey's Activity in the Caucasus

Ankara's Regional Ambitions Move into High Gear

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Turkey's foreign policy activity is probably designed to create an additional platform for foreign policy bargaining with Moscow on issues of interest to Ankara, and not by any means only in the South Caucasus. Along with bilateral interaction with Azerbaijan and with the countries of Central Asia, political, economic and humanitarian cooperation within the framework of the "Turkic Council" is being strengthened.

On September 15, 2020, on the 102nd anniversary of the seizure of Baku by the "Islamic Army of the Caucasus" commanded by Nuri Pasha, the planes and helicopters of the air forces of Azerbaijan and Turkey performed demonstration flights over Azerbaijan's second

largest city, Ganja. “Brotherhood and friendship” between Azerbaijan and Turkey is an example for the whole world, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said on the same day, in a message addressed to his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The reference to the historical date comes along with gratitude for the Turkish leadership’s support for the position of Baku in connection with the July clashes on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border, for which each of the opposing sides blames the other.

During the official visit of the Turkish president to Baku at the end of February, important agreements were reached, including the allocation of 200 million Turkish liras (about \$30 million) for the purchase of military equipment and services from the Turkish military-industrial complex, demonstrating progress in a number of promising areas. In Ankara, military-technical cooperation with Baku is considered the basis for trade and economic cooperation. The contractual framework for bilateral cooperation in the energy and mining sectors is expanding with the involvement of both public and private companies. In 2019, the volume of trade between Turkey and Azerbaijan amounted to approximately \$4.5 billion, and an ambitious goal has been set to increase it to \$15 billion by 2023. As Ilham Aliyev said, “Azerbaijan has invested \$17 billion in the Turkish economy so far. Turkish investments in Azerbaijan have amounted to \$12 billion. SOCAR has new plans, new investment projects. As a result of their implementation, the volume of Azerbaijani investments in Turkey will reach \$20 billion.” In 2019, the construction of the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline was completed, which allowed Azerbaijan to significantly strengthen its position in the Turkish gas market. As a result, at the end of the first half of 2020, Baku ranked among the leaders in the supply of natural gas to Turkey (almost 5.5 billion cubic meters, an increase of 23.4% from the same period of last year). A joint media platform is being formed to advance deep integration and opposition to what Baku and Ankara consider “black propaganda.”

The strategic alliance and bilateral partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey, in accordance with the principle of “one nation, two states” laid down by Heydar Aliyev, are an important factor in ensuring peace and security, contributing to the development of regional cooperation, as officials in Baku are confident. On the contrary, Yerevan does not hide its concern about the qualitative strengthening of military and political cooperation between the two neighboring states, in the context of the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which could lead to another military escalation at almost any moment. Despite the fact that the July events are trifling when compared to the “four-day war” in April 2016 in terms of the intensity of the clashes and the number of victims, their foreign policy “echo” turned out to be immeasurably louder.

“Our military industry—from unmanned aerial vehicles to missiles, electronic systems and other technologies—is all at the disposal of Azerbaijan. In addition to transferring new weapons systems to Azerbaijan, we are ready to modernize the existing models and produce them jointly,” Ismail Demir, head of the Turkish Defense Industry Department, said during a meeting with a high-level military delegation from Baku on July 16. Almost immediately, a number of airspace monitoring services recorded flights to Azerbaijan by Turkish A400 military transport aircraft, presumably with military cargo.

Simultaneously, with the resignation of Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov, a more offensive style has been chosen in political and diplomatic contacts with Russia, especially with regard to Russian-Armenian military and political cooperation. It comes down to accusing Moscow of plans to disrupt export pipelines with someone else’s hands in order to squeeze Azerbaijan out of the Turkish energy market. It should be noted that one of the main areas of cooperation actively promoted by Turkey with Azerbaijan and Georgia is the protection of energy infrastructure facilities. The provisions of the Memorandum

of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Government of Georgia, and the Government of the Republic of Turkey on cooperation in the defense sphere, signed in 2018, envisage a wide range of activities, including the exchange of confidential information.

Some of the recent events and trends indicate that the next hotbed of tension may be the border line between Armenia and the Nakhichevan exclave, which is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenia's Zangezur Mountains and the southern regions of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, adjacent to the Araks River.

The fact that this territory has a common border with Turkey greatly simplifies bilateral interaction, which became very clear during a series of recent joint military exercises involving a significant amount of manpower and equipment, including tanks, heavy armored vehicles, missile and artillery systems, drones, and front-line aviation. For example, as part of the exercises, T-129 ATAK attack helicopters were delivered to Nakhichevan in military transport aircraft.

The Turkish media are openly discussing the issue of deploying full-scale military bases in Nakhichevan and Absheron, which, on the one hand, does not contradict Turkey's NATO membership, and on the other hand, fits into the logic of foreign policy expansion along the periphery of the former Ottoman Empire and even outside of it (for example, in Africa). There is reason to believe that after the above-mentioned exercises, Turkey's F-16 multipurpose fighters and their crews, as well as a number of Bayraktar TB2 strike drones, which were combat-tested in Syria and Libya, were left in Azerbaijan. Yerevan has reacted to this by conducting its own exercises, improving its forward defensive lines and activating the "Middle East" vector of its foreign policy. In addition to intensified diplomatic contacts with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, one can mention the recent working visit of Armenian Foreign Minister

Zohrab Mnatsakanyan to Egypt, whose leadership is concerned about Ankara's growing regional ambitions.

Turkey's foreign policy activity is probably designed to create an additional platform for foreign policy bargaining with Moscow on issues of interest to Ankara, and not by any means only in the South Caucasus. Along with bilateral interaction with Azerbaijan and with the countries of Central Asia, political, economic and humanitarian cooperation within the framework of the "Turkic Council" is being strengthened. Thus, Turkey offers itself as a regional leader for the Middle East, North Africa, partly for the Balkans and the Caucasus, while primarily pursuing its own interests, not least economic ones.