

Georgian conflict poses dilemma for Turkey

The “Straits Question”

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Given the proximity of Turkey to Georgia and its intense economic and political involvement in the region, the Turkish government’s reaction to the conflict between Georgia and Russia has been remarkably muted.

While NATO (of which Turkey is a member) has openly sided with Georgia, and the European Union (which Turkey wants to join) has strongly condemned Russian recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence, the Turkish government has made no such statement. Instead the Turkish foreign ministry has issued a short statement limited to expressing Turkish anxiety over recent events.

The growing tensions between Washington and Moscow are clearly viewed nervously within ruling circles in Ankara and present them with a dilemma.

On the one hand, Turkey is deeply involved in US and European attempts to gain access to the Caspian region and to exploit its oil and gas reserves bypassing Russian territory. The two most important pipelines in this respect—the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the projected Nabucco gas pipeline—both go through Georgian and Turkish territory. The same is true with the recently planned railway project linking Turkey with Georgia and Central Asia.

Economic relations between Turkey and Georgia have grown. Some 100 Turkish companies are active in Georgia, mainly in the building sector, and have invested approximately US\$600 million. The trade volume between the two countries is US\$1 billion a year. Turkey is also selling arms and ammunition to the Georgian military and providing training for its officers.

On the other hand, Russia has become an indispensable partner of the Turkish economy, which despite experiencing considerable growth rates in recent years remains extremely vulnerable.

The trade volume with Russia was \$27 billion last year and is expected to rise to \$38 billion this year. Russia is expected to replace Germany as Turkey’s most important trading partner. Turkish building contractors and supermarket chains are very active in Russia. Russia provides Turkey with 70 percent of its natural gas, which Turkey desperately needs for the generation of electricity. Russia also accounts for the biggest numbers of foreign tourists in Turkey—2.5 million a year. For the first time this summer, the popular Mediterranean resort of Antalya saw more Russian than German tourists.

Russia has already demonstrated Ankara’s vulnerability by subjecting Turkish lorries entering Russia to strict control, extending the waiting time at the border up to one month. This is widely interpreted as retribution for Ankara’s decision to allow US warships to pass the Turkish Straits and enter the Black Sea under the pretext of bringing humanitarian aid to Georgia.

The unease provoked by the conflict in Georgia was reflected in

several editorials in the Turkish press.

Columnist Nasuhi Gungor complained August 28 in the Turkish daily *Star*: “Due to the current situation, Turkey is now moving through a difficult time, unlike anything it has seen in years. Now it’s more difficult to make our stand.”

The *Turkish Daily News* commented on the same day: “Turkey’s position as a precarious bridge between East and West is highlighted once more as it is torn between its NATO obligations and its important trade partner Russia. Barriers at customs remind Turkey of the potential danger of upsetting Moscow, while NATO ships on the Black Sea armed with Tomahawks and anti-ship missiles irritate Russians.”

The paper underscores the unsustainable character of Turkey’s makeshift diplomacy: “Walking along the lines of a fragile diplomacy in the wake of the latest Caucasus crisis between Russia and Georgia, Turkey wants to neither disengage itself from its Western allies nor alienate its trade and energy partner Russia.”

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Attempts by the US and its European allies to isolate Russia have reopened the “Straits Question,” which played a central role in the imperialist conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries. The Turkish press has complained about US pressure to revise the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates access of military vessels to the Black Sea.

The Montreux Convention was signed at the eve of World War II and handed control over the Bosphorus Straits and the Dardanelles, which previously had been under international control, back to Turkey. While granting free passage for merchant vessels, it severely limited access of warships to the Black Sea. There was a strict limit placed on the tonnage and the number of vessels that could pass the Straits at any one time and on the length of time they would be permitted to stay in the Black Sea. Less restrictive rules applied to the Black Sea states—i.e., to the Soviet Union, the only Black Sea state other than Turkey with a significant fleet.

While the Montreux Convention, at the instigation of Britain, put some restrictions on Soviet access to the Mediterranean, it mainly ensured that outside powers could not exploit the Straits to threaten the Soviet Union and granted Soviet dominance of the Black Sea. During World War II the convention effectively prevented the Axis powers from sending naval forces through the Straits to attack the Soviet Union.

After the war the Montreux Convention remained in effect with only a few alterations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, there has been mounting pressure by the US to change it. The US was not present in Montreux when the convention was signed.

If—as desired by Washington—Ukraine and Georgia are admitted to NATO, the Black Sea would become NATO waters. It would be surrounded by five NATO members—Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia—with only a relatively short coast strip left to Russia, whose main Black Sea naval port Sevastopol is presently on Ukraine territory.

The issue of the Montreux Convention came up when the US attempted to send two hospital warships, weighing a total of 140,000 tons, through the Straits carrying “aid” to Georgia. The Turkish government refused permission on the basis that this contradicted the Montreux Convention. Washington finally sent three smaller ships instead.

On August 22, the *Hurriyet* newspaper published a comment on this incident by its high-profile columnist Oktay Eksi under the headline “United States Scratches the Montreux Convention Itch.” Eksi noted that the US administration had already asked for changes to the Montreux Convention before attacking Iraq, pointing out that this was aimed at Iran and Russia.

“Now we are seeing signs from the United States that it is not comfortable with the Montreux Convention,” Eksi wrote. “For example, the United States tried to test the convention when it got the notion to attack Iraq in 2003. Thankfully this project failed when the infamous granting of permission, which anticipated Turkey supporting the US operation in Iraq, was rejected by the Turkish parliament.

“In all honesty, from Trabzon and Samsun in Turkey [on the Black Sea coast] would you go to Iraq or would you go to Iran and other countries in the Caucasus? Isn’t this example enough to show what reckoning lies behind scratching the Montreux itch?” Eksi asked.

In an article entitled “Again, the Straits...” published in the August 20 issue of the *Star*, academic Beril Dedeoglu complains about Turkey’s dilemma: “While the US and Russia are both happy to find a ‘real’ enemy to legitimize their actions, difficult days lie ahead for countries caught in the middle. Turkey is one of those countries, and one vexing issue concerns the Black Sea.”

Along the same lines as Eksi, Dedeoglu refers to the pre-Iraq war attempts of the US to gain access to the Black Sea. She notes: “As you may remember, the US requested to use Turkish territory as a staging ground for its March 2003 invasion of Iraq, but Turkey refused. But when the issue was still being debated, the US apparently believed the answer would be yes, and so its ships were poised just off our Mediterranean coast, ready to unload their equipment. At around the same time, the US started to conclude that the Eastern Black Sea coast would be a good place for its operations.

“While the Mediterranean is a justifiable arena for the Iraq operation, it is harder to use Iraq to explain a Black Sea presence. At that time, people thought that the US would attack Iran, but later we saw that the US was trying to put military pressure on Russia in the Black Sea. Even if military ships could get to the Black Sea via Romania, the Turkish Straits are obviously the most important passage. At that time, the US requested to use the Straits and thus changed the regime as defined in the Montreux Convention. Montreux restricts the passage of US military ships to the Black Sea and also Russian passage (in the other direction) to the Mediterranean and once Turkey violates this, nobody can say how this will end up being used in the future. Before the war in Iraq, Turkey rejected the US request,

and Russia welcomed this, as it blocked a US presence in the Black Sea. But now, due to the conflict in Georgia, the issue has come up again.”

Eksi and Dedeoglu fail to mention a proposal by the US administration two years ago envisaging an expansion into the Black Sea of the area of responsibility of a NATO-led counterterrorism force operating in the Mediterranean—Operation Active Endeavour. Ankara opposed this proposition as it feared the erosion of the 70-year-old Montreux Convention.

The environment surrounding Turkey has dramatically changed with the end of the Cold War and the launching of the US war in Iraq. The US has been transformed from a stabilizing factor into the number one destabilising force. As US pressure on Russia mounts, it becomes increasingly difficult for Turkey to maintain good relations with both sides. This will undoubtedly increase divisions within the Turkish ruling elite, where tensions are already at a boiling point.

In the meantime, the spin-doctors of the Turkish ruling elite hope for some last-minute compromise. The last paragraph of Dedeoglu’s article reads: “In Georgia, where two players are now meeting, Turkey is about to lose its basis for working with the US in the south and Russia in the north. This could force Turkey to make a choice. I hope Russia will be able to make the US abandon this push, and Turkey will be able to explain to Washington why its request is problematic.”

Of course, a bourgeois paper cannot be expected to analyse the underlying causes of the deepening Georgian crisis and the eruption of US militarism. These can be traced to the frantic efforts of the ruling elites to overcome the fundamental and irresolvable contradictions of the profit system itself, i.e., between the world economy and the outmoded capitalist nation-state system, and the conflict between socialized production and the anarchy of the market based on private ownership. Falling rates of profit and a deepening crisis of the global economy are pressing the major powers into a relentless competition for markets, cheap labour and resources that under capitalism can ultimately only be settled by military means.

The Turkish ruling elite has no solution to this and is about to lose all of its “manoeuvring capacity.” In the economic sphere Turkish capitalism is very vulnerable, while in the political sphere the country is in the grips of an acute regime crisis.

Six-and-a half years after the assault on Afghanistan and five years after the occupation of Iraq by a US-led coalition, a conflagration looms in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia that threatens to transform the entire region into a military inferno.



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