

The Wolf, the Bear, and the Eagle: Peace in the Valley?

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JAMES W. WARHOLA AND EGEMEN B. BEZCI, MAR 10 2011

Just as the eagle serves as unofficial national symbol of the USA, so does the grey wolf for the Republic of Turkey, a longtime friend of the USA. During the past decade, however, a number of Turkey's foreign policy moves have provoked wariness in the West, and especially in the US, regarding the wolf's motives and intentions. Among those moves has been an unmistakably improved pattern of relations with Russia, with whom it previously experienced centuries of antagonism and episodic warfare that, until the 1920s, literally drew and re-drew their respective imperial borders. More recently, however, the wolf and the bear have settled into a *rapprochement* that has changed the political landscape of western Eurasia: originating in diminished threat-perception once the cold war was over, it has since blossomed into a remarkable volume of trade, cultural exchange, even mutual self-descriptions of the relationship as a "strategic partnership." Turkey has simultaneously pursued a more activist foreign policy, which has troubled some in the West (particularly in the US), especially since the Islamic-based AK Party came to power in 2002. These trends occurred alongside an increasingly assertive Russia, which since Putin's June 2000 *Foreign Policy Concept* has unabashedly sought to expand and solidify Russian influence in the world, most particularly in its immediate surroundings. Is the Turkish-Russian *rapprochement* cause for concern? Or might the wolf and the bear together provide a source of diplomatic leverage for the resolution of regional and perhaps even global problems? And where might the eagle fit into this picture?

Two things are clear: first, the wolf needs the bear more than vice-versa, for reasons of energy-resource dependence, among others; second, the eagle needs neither wolf nor bear, but without either of them its influence in the region is curtailed in a manner that serves the interests of no one. To understand why this is so, it is instructive to consider the vexing case of Nagorno-Karabakh, a 1,700 square-mile territory hotly disputed by Armenia and Azerbaijan whose present boundary lines were drawn by Stalin in the 1920s. Wedged between Russia, Georgia, Turkey, and Iran, this so-called "frozen conflict" is more than a territorial dispute between Armenia (formally allied with Russia in the Collective Security Treaty Organization) and Azerbaijan (closely related to Turkey in language, culture, history and ethnicity) – in fact, it is emblematic of the capacity of regional actors to either cooperate, or face the grim prospect of increasing likelihood of war. As we shall see below, it is also anything but a "frozen conflict", with armed casualties mounting as reconciliation processes have stalled. From the vantage point of the eagle, however, the knotted stalemate need not continue indefinitely, provided a recognition of the newly-emerged power configurations in the region are duly acknowledged. Among these is the increasingly solidified Russian-Turkish *rapprochement*, which may ironically serve as the foundation for loosening the knot of tension and thus providing the basis for resolution. How and why is this so?

When the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict first erupted in the latter 1980s, neither the domestic and nor international political environment were amenable to Turkey assuming a premier place in regional conflict resolution. Russia was in no better position, of course, being the epicenter of the political convulsions from which the conflicts originally emerged. Since the AK Party's election to power in Turkey in 2002, however, that country has experienced solid

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economic growth, dramatically strengthened civil society, substantially diminished external threats, and expanded commercial and political activities in the Balkans, Black Sea, Middle East, and even into Africa and Latin America. The Gaza aid-flotilla raid of 31 May 2010 showed that the wolf had become a major regional actor indeed; but might its influence be a foundation for conflict-resolution? There are several reasons why the persisting, vexing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict may be viewed as a litmus test of Turkey's capacity to do so.

First, this conflict has placed the entire region in a tense, volatile stalemate since the latter 1980s. Second, the rhetoric in the region has recently become even more belligerent and dangerously inflammatory than previously, and is accompanied by substantial arms buildups by the disputants. Third, mediation efforts of the OSCE's Minsk Group (formed in 1992 and co-chaired by the USA, Russia, and France, and composed of other 10 members) have shown scant progress towards a resolution that both Armenia and Azerbaijan would agree upon. Also, the authoritarian nature of the disputants' political regimes, external support for the disputants (including Iranian support for Armenia over N-K), and core issues of political identity among Armenia and Azerbaijan have persistently thwarted the Minsk Group, even though the Group's efforts have arguably kept the dispute from escalating into major war. Finally, Turkey's lack of diplomatic relations with Armenia and the failed nature of the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation protocols underscore the limits of Turkey's capacity to unilaterally mediate the N-K conflict.

In winter of 2011 the conflict exhibited a new dimension. All the while the reconciliation process between Turkey and Armenia continued to stall, the N-K issue has become even more tense. Significantly, fatal skirmishes have become more common since 2009 – during which year the International Crisis Group warned in October that the N-K status quo was becoming “increasingly difficult to sustain.” Equally significant, a general arms buildup in the region has continued apace (Azerbaijan's military budget exceeds the entire budget of Armenia). Amid these changes, during the summer of 2010 Azerbaijan and Armenia each signed new military agreements – but hardly with each other: Azerbaijan's is with Turkey (signed August 16) and Armenia's is with Russia (signed August 20). Azerbaijan recently ratified its side of the agreement, while the Turkish parliament is still considering the matter. The escalation of tensions in the region in the face of these formal military alliances is grave in the extreme, and particularly in light of Armenia's membership in the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, wherein “an attack upon one is an attack upon all.” Given that even Armenia vitally supports but does not formally recognize N-K, does this mean that Russia would be pulled into a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over N-K? No one knows for sure, although the International Crisis Group reports that Kremlin opinion on this matter would be against it (*ICG Policy Briefing*, 8 February 2011, pp. 14-15). In this regard, Turkey and Russia would appear to hold the keys to prevent the outbreak of broad-scale war and perhaps even to resolve the conflict – conversely, both countries would be harmed the most from such an eventuality. Turkey and Russia are therefore, in tandem, heavily involved and invested in the prospective resolution of this conflict. Accordingly, Russian President Medvedev met his Azeri and Armenian counterparts on 5 March 2011 to try once again to ease tension between them. The Russian President stated that their “intention is to resolve all controversial issues in a peaceful manner,” and few would dispute the advisability of this intent. The question, though, is just how such an intent might be made manifest in the present configuration?

Why might the self-styled “strategic partnership” between Russia and Turkey serve as the basis for an innovative resolution? First, the complex quadrangle of relations among Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia are substantially different today than when the conflict erupted in 1988, and even from the frequently-ignored “cease-fire” of 1994. Second, the conflict itself has spawned an *internal political dynamic* in both Armenia and Azerbaijan from which a concessionary disposition to the N-K issue would be politically suicidal for the sponsoring party; thus the solution must come adventitiously — “from outside,” as it were. Third, Turkey and Russia well recognize that the stalemate serves no useful purpose and thwarts numerous good purposes: trade, security, and cultural exchange, among others. Finally, Turkey's kin-type relations to Azerbaijan could serve as powerful leverage upon that country: Turkish foreign policy makers would not likely risk relations with Russia, even in the name of helping their Azeri kin-folk who are also a Turkic speaking, Muslim nation – the configuration of domestic and international forces in Turkey is thus positioned to powerfully leverage Azerbaijan. Similarly, Russian leverage over Armenia might engender more flexibility there in countenancing an otherwise disagreeable approach to resolution of the N-K issue. Thus the Turkish-Russian *rapprochement* should not be viewed by the West as a menace or even irritant, but rather the platform upon which the N-K regional knot of contention, as well as possibly others, might find resolution. The regional political landscape of western Eurasia has shifted dramatically in the past decade; we in the West would do well to adjust our

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perceptions accordingly.

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