

Abnormalisation

The bumpy road to Turkish-Armenian rapprochement

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On 10 October in Zurich, the Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers signed an agreement to establish diplomatic relations and open their common border (closed by the Turks in 1993 out of solidarity with Azerbaijan, with which Armenia was then at war). Four days later Armenian President Serge Sargsyan made good his pledge to visit Turkey for the second leg of a World Cup qualifier between the Turkish and Armenian national teams.

The reconciliation and normalisation process between Turkey and Armenia is certainly a major development, coming as it does after nearly a century of animosity and mistrust. For landlocked and economically starved Armenia, the opening with Turkey is a window to the West – an opportunity to wean itself from its dependence on Russia for trade, energy supplies, and security. For Turkey, the rapprochement is a fitting component of a ‘zero problems with neighbours’ foreign policy that has paid significant dividends over the past decade. Just as importantly, it is a way to win brownie points with the EU and forestall US recognition of the Armenian genocide.

For all its historical significance, and for all the benefits that it is expected to deliver, the signing of the agreement took place in a tense and sombre atmosphere. Unable to stomach the language of the Turkish minister’s draft speech – particularly, as rumour has it, an indirect reference to Armenia’s occupation of Nagorno Karabakh – the Armenian delegates had been on the verge of a walkout. It was only thanks to last-minute diplomatic manoeuvring that both sides agreed to go ahead with the signing. In the end, the ministers made no statements whatsoever. The ceremony took place in total silence.

It was a telling sign of the difficulties that lay ahead. With Ankara tying it to the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, and with Washington tying it to possible US recognition of the Armenian genocide, the Turkish-Armenian normalisation process threatens to unravel – or end up in a knot. This would do significant damage not only to Turkey’s aspirations as a regional power, but also to US and European interests in the Caucasus, playing, at the same time, directly into the hands of Russia.

The festering disagreement over history is one reason why the process may run into serious turbulence. In what the Turkish side has hailed as a major achievement, the October agreement calls for the creation of a commission to study historical records and archives “to define existing problems and formulate recommendations”. As far as the Turks are concerned, this means nothing less than revisiting the history

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of the Armenian massacres of 1915. Not so for the Armenians. Discussing the genocide with those who deny it, they insist, means compromising historical truth. Armenians fear, with good reason, that the commission might become a Turkish ruse to stall international recognition of the genocide. The Turks make no secret of hoping that the normalisation process or the historical dialogue can put an end to the Armenian diaspora's recognition campaign. They are wrong, however. As the 100th anniversary of the genocide approaches, the campaign will only pick up strength and speed. Liberal intellectuals in Turkey may have challenged the official line on the events of 1915 in recent years, after all, but the government in Ankara has been intransigent. As far as the Armenians see it, the history commission could be an exercise in comparing both countries' historiographies – but nothing more.

There is an even more immediate obstacle ahead: the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly stated, both before and after 10 October, that his country's parliament will not ratify the agreement with Armenia until and unless it sees movement in negotiations on Nagorno Karabakh. With a solution to the conflict not even on the horizon, the Turkish government may choose to look for *signs* of increased momentum in the Karabakh talks – if only to mollify Azerbaijan and the opposition back home – and only then submit the Zurich deal to a vote. Even then, Erdogan's AKP may choose not to impose party discipline on its members and thus wash its hands of the outcome. Worse yet, the Turkish leadership may allow the agreement to languish on the parliament floor for years on end. It would not be for the first time. In 2005 Turkey signed an agreement extending its customs union with the EU to the bloc's newest members, including Cyprus. It has not ratified it to date.

Whatever Ankara decides to do, Azerbaijan has already made it clear that Turkey's decision to sign the Zurich agreement without securing Armenian concessions on Nagorno Karabakh is tantamount to a betrayal. Within days of the signing, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev threatened to cut gas volumes for export to Turkey. It is high time, he also stated, that Baku cease the "illogical" practice of selling gas to Ankara at a third of the world market price.

Baku began baring its teeth months earlier. After Turkey and Armenia concluded a road map for the normalisation of ties in April the Azeris not only criticised the deal but intimated that they might reconsider their commitment to deliver gas to Turkey and Europe through Nabucco, a major pipeline project backed by the EU. In June, as if to underscore the point, Baku signed a deal allowing Russia to purchase nominal quantities of Azeri gas from the beginning of 2010. Gazprom chief Aleksei Miller used the occasion to claim that Russia had beaten Nabucco to the punch by becoming a preferred buyer for the second half of Azerbaijan's enormous Shah Deniz gas field.

If mismanaged by the Turks, the normalisation process with Armenia will deliver Azerbaijan straight into the hands of the Russians and scupper any plans for an East-West energy corridor – that, essentially, is the message from Baku. Though it appears to be a bluff, Turkey, by refusing to disentangle its relationship with Armenia from the Karabakh issue, is unwilling to call it.

Ankara has failed to prepare the ground for a rapprochement with Armenia and for a domestic debate on the genocide issue. Instead, it has become hostage to its own rhetoric, stoking anxieties and unrealistic expectations at home for purely political benefit. Erdogan's government has effectively boxed itself into a corner. If it pushes ahead with normalisation, then – having infused the debate on Armenia with gratuitous references to Karabakh and Turkish-Azerbaijani brotherhood – it will have set the stage for a showdown with Azerbaijan and its own nationalist opposition. If it does not, it will have frustrated its regional ambitions, disappointed its EU backers, and severely undermined its credibility. Finally, if it continues to index its relationship with the US to the issue of genocide recognition, it will have consolidated the risk of a major crisis with Washington.

Appealing as it may be, implementing a 'zero problems with neighbours' policy is often easier said than done. In a region as complex as the Caucasus, where the interests of several powers often intersect and collide, Turkey, for better or worse, will find it hard to be everyone's best friend. Ankara must set priorities, make difficult choices, and reconcile itself to the fact that it cannot have its cake and eat it. To begin with, it must stop pretending that an opening with Armenia will come at no cost to its relationship with Azerbaijan. By the same token, it should realise that it cannot forever count on a two-thirds discount on Azeri gas. Finally, it must make the case, at home and in Baku, that it can better serve Azerbaijan's interests by engaging with Armenia than pushing it away.