

Exploring Turkey's Strategic Goals in Caucasus Region During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the lack of a superior power in the Caucasus region has led to regional and international great powers competition. The existing energy resources are the main reason for competitions in the south Caucasus, and besides other crises, the resources have heightened the political tensions among regional and international players. The Karabakh crisis, which has been a regional conflict for many decades, was precipitated in 2020 due to unprecedented armed clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which led to an increase in tensions and threats in the Caucasus region. During this time, Turkey, by supporting Azerbaijan, has had a prominent role in determining the results of the conflicts in favor of Azerbaijan. To clarify Turkey's role in this matter, the present study explored Turkey's strategic goals in the Caucasus region during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis. Turkey's strategic goals in this regard have been argued to be geopolitical development, dominance over energy pipelines, and the reinforcement of its position in both the Caucasus region and the international arena.

Keywords: Karabakh, the Caucasus region, Turkey, Azerbaijan, geopolitics, realism

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the formation of superior power gaps in the Caucasus region (Yazdani & Kheiri, 2017, p. 128). The south Caucasus region consists of three countries; Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars pointed out to this gap in the Caucasus region, and consequently, regional players such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey as well as other players such as the United States and the European Union, have paid special attention to the Caucasus region in order to gain benefits from and political dominance over the region, in a way that has manifested itself in the form of geopolitical competition. Since 1987, disagreements over the Karabakh region have led to violence and conflicts between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mountainous Karabakh region, which was a part of the Soviet Union, belonged to Azerbaijan. The Karabakh region has both historical and religious importance for Armenia in a way that the Karabakh region forms a part of Armenia's history, and most of its residents are Armenian (Vatankhah & Navazeni, 2021, p. 23).

The formation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is one of the most important factors that has influenced geopolitical, economical, and political conflicts among regional and international powers in the Caucasus region. During these conflicts and especially in recent years, Turkey, as a regional country in the Caucasus region, has had more political activities in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region, especially in Syria, showing that Turkey seeks regional power.

The formation of violent armed clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Karabakh and nearby regions on September 27, 2020, as well as the continuation of conflicts and clashes, threatened regional security (www.acaps.org, 2020). The recent Karabakh crisis between Azerbaijan and Armenia became Turkey's top priority in its foreign policy. During the crisis, Turkey supported Azerbaijan. Ankara's support of Baku changed dramatically from 1990 to 2010 (Avdaliani, 2020, p. 4).

The main research question of this study is then: What are Turkey's strategic goals in the Caucasus region during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis? The related research hypothesis is that: Turkey's strategic goals in the Caucasus region are developing geopolitically, gaining and establishing power in the region, gaining more energy security, and having economic benefits. The authors have tried to clarify these goals from a political realism perspective.

Theoretical Background of Political Realism

One of the common assumptions of political realism is that economy cannot influence politics; however, politics can influence economy. The fundamental principle of realism is struggle for existence, in a way that realism considers struggle for existence as the most important goal that governments seek and that leads their foreign policies (Roohi, Shafiee, & Hajimineh, 2019, p. 47). Among the scholars, Hans Morgenthau has explained realism in his book *Politics Among Nations* as a comprehensive theory of international relations. Morgenthau developed six principles for the theory of realism, among which the pursuit of national interest is used as a key concept for comprehending and interpreting international and foreign policies. As Morgenthau states, the principle of the pursuit of national interest is defined in terms of national power, meaning that national interest is the same as power. In political realism, countries' goals and motives in international relations and foreign policy are gaining and maintaining maximum power. In realism, it is believed that the willingness to prepare for gaining power and the obligation to struggle for existence have logically encouraged and tempted logical countries to follow a foreign policy based on the balance of power (Firoozabadi, 2016, pp. 165-167).

The theory of political realism, which is referred to as the policy of power, is one of the political approaches that has long been considered as a dominant paradigm in the studies of international policy. The realism approach is a pragmatic and empirical approach that emphasizes countries' effective and logical use of power for their own national benefits. A foreign policy that is based on realism is an interest-oriented policy whose aim is the pursuit and maintenance of national interests. Because of focusing on objectivism and objective realities, the theory of realism is one of the theories that can be suitable for interpreting countries' approaches to their foreign policies and their reactions to their surrounding events and changes. The reason is that realism matters for maintaining countries' national interests in international relations (Koushki & Goodarzi, 2016, p. 4). Morgenthau states that realism is defined in terms of power, and its most important principle is the survival and preservation of the country. In an anarchic and competitive international system, all countries inevitably protect their physical, political, and cultural identities from the threats and aggression of other

countries. For Morgenthau, national interests are tantamount to national survival, and the dominant logic in international politics is the acquisition of power and the security of nations (Firoozabadi, 2016, p. 167).

Turkey's behavior during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis in the south Caucasus region and the presence of an anarchic situation forced regional and trans-regional powers to adopt some policies for maintaining their national interests.

The targets countries pursue in their approaches to foreign policy depending on the conditions of a particular region and the decision-making leaders. However, the policies that Turkey adopted in dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis are interpretable from a realism point of view, meaning that Turkey has acted based on obtaining and maintaining its national interests. In this study, it has been attempted to shed some light on the strategic goals of Turkey's foreign policy and the national interests that Turkey pursued and obtained from the recent Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis. Turkey's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis in 2020 was to support Azerbaijan, politically and militarily, in a way that protected its national interests. In this crisis, Turkey has sought to gain a regional position, geopolitical development, increase its influence, and maintain energy security.

The Importance of Caucasus and Geopolitical Development for Turkey

Among the countries of the Caucasus region, Turkey was the first country that recognized the republics of the Caucasus region and the central Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has played a major role in the south Caucasus region. The fact that the south Caucasus region is placed within two close sea areas, namely the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, has made it an important strategic area for Turkey. Davutoğlu in his book *Strategic Depth* (2001) believed that historically, geographically, and culturally, Turkey considers itself as an inseparable part of the Caucasus region. Davutoğlu states that the Caucasus region for Turkey is like an open gate to Asia, and that Turkey, in its new strategies, has paid special attention to the Northern Caucasus region and the Middle East. This means that the south Caucasus region for Turkey is like a political center of gravity for these two geographical areas, that is, the Northern Caucasus region and the Middle East (Cited in Bozorgmehri & Tabatabaee, 2017, p. 112).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Azerbaijan, Turkey has always supported Azerbaijan because of common cultural relations and geopolitical aspirations. One of the examples of increased role of Turkey's political activities in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea region is Turkey's policies concerning the Karabakh region, which has created a close tie between Ankara and Baku. During recent years, the events occurring in the south Caucasus region have shown Turkey's willingness to give Azerbaijan military support. One of the most important reasons for Turkey's military support of Azerbaijan is energy transport. As Turkey's gas consumption increased, Azerbaijan has gradually become Turkey's main gas provider.

During the first half of 2020, Turkey imported 20.4 million cubic meters of gas from Azerbaijan. In the previous year (2019) Turkey's gas import from Russia dropped by about 62 percent, and in May 2020, Azerbaijan was formally considered as Turkey's best gas provider (Avdaliani, 2020, p. 1). As an energy provider and a defense partner, Azerbaijan, as a Turkish-speaking country, has a close tie with Turkey, so that in 2020 the two countries had a joint military exercise.

However, despite all this, Turkey denies any direct involvement in the armed clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. For example, Turkey dismissed Armenia's claim that Turkey shot down one of Armenia's fighter jets. However, Turkey stated that it will do "whatever is necessary" to support Azerbaijan (EPRS, 2020).

Differences between Turkey and Russia on Libya and Syria made Ankara more determined to find alternative ways for importing gas so that Turkey can reduce its dependence on Russia's. The recent 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis, whose conflict was unprecedented compared to former conflicts, was a bilateral opportunity for both Baku and Ankara. Baku could show itself as the main gas provider of the Caucasus region and Turkey, by its military and arms support of Azerbaijan, could show itself as an influential country in the political events of the region and could reduce its dependence on Russia's gas by having access to Azerbaijan's gas through the Caspian Sea (Avdaliani, 2020, p. 2).

The geopolitical importance of the recent Karabakh crisis is mainly because of the breakout of conflicts in the Tovuz region, which is outside the Karabakh region. The Tovuz region has geostrategic importance; it is located in the main routes of energy and transportation, that is, the oil pipelines of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi. The oil pipelines of Erzurum and pipelines of south Caucasus region, which form the first part of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), pass through the Tovuz region (Ergun & Valiyev, 2020, p. 4), giving the Tovuz region geostrategic importance.

Turkey's dependence on Russia's gas in the Caucasus region, which is a geopolitical matter, indicates the importance of this region for Turkey. Therefore, Turkey has been seeking alternatives to importing energy from Russia, because if Turkey can meet its energy demands outside Russia, it will be able to expand its geopolitical activities. As long as Turkey depends on Russia's gas, it is under pressure by Moscow; therefore, Ankara cannot follow its policies in the south Caucasus region.

The Maintenance of Regional and Global Position

For nearly three decades, the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis has become one of the major crises in the regions. During the early 1990s, the war between Baku and Yerevan resulted in the occupation of the self-governing Karabakh region as well as seven major cities close to the vast Karabakh region in Azerbaijan. Although a ceasefire was declared in 1994 between Azerbaijan and Armenia, since then peace negotiations for solving the political cul-de-sacs and Azerbaijan's attempts to restore its territorial integrity have proven to be ineffective and in vain (Garibov, 2020).

One of Turkey's strategic goals in the Caucasus region is Turkey's attempts to undermine Russia's position and to strengthen its own influence in the region. Turkey's involvement in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis was one of Turkey's plans to reach its strategic goals. In the recent 2020 armed clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey showed its willingness to help Azerbaijan regain and control its occupied regions by giving Azerbaijan political, military, and weaponry support (especially unmanned aerial vehicles).

Besides Turkey, the United States and the European Unions also seem to be willing to weaken Russia's position in the Caucasus region to increase their own influence in the region. To reach this aim, western countries have been trying to develop their political and economic relationships with Azerbaijan and Armenia (Hvoz, 2020).

Ankara, by military involvement in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis, is trying to increase Turkey's influences on the south Caucasus region, which can result in Azerbaijan dependence on Turkey than Russia. Moreover, by playing a decisive role in the Caucasus region, Ankara is trying to prove to the United States and Europe that regional problems cannot be resolved without considering Turkey.

Turkey's recent measures in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis is due to the anarchic situation of the region and the entanglement of regional and trans-regional countries' interests in this area, so, Turkey had to

take some measures to balance the power in the region; this could help Turkey save and boost its regional and global position. Turkey's president described Ankara's support of Azerbaijan as a part of Turkey's effort to "put Turkey to the place it deserves in the new global order" (Coskun & Spicer, 2020).

Dominance Over Energy Pipelines and Maintenance of Energy Security

Oil and gas, as the main fossil fuels in today's world, are considered the main sources of energy. The location of these resources in special countries in the world has given special geopolitical, geoeconomics, and security importance to the oil-and-gas rich places. Fossil fuels need to be transported to the different markets. Oil and gas pipelines, then, are important not only because they are related to energy producers' and consumers' interests, but also because they influence the interests of transiting countries. This is so because the transport of energy through pipelines is not only a technical and geographical matter but also a matter that involves political considerations and economic benefits of the beneficiary countries (Fallahi & Vosoughi, 2020, p. 62). More specifically, energy issues are usually involved with geopolitical approaches that pay special attention to realism concepts of dominance, competition, and conflict (Erşena & Celikpala, 2019, p. 589).

The south Caucasus region has long been at the crossroads of energy transmission through railways and pipelines. Russia's oil and gas are transported to countries in the region through pipelines and railroads and to Europe through the Caspian Sea. However, the conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia deprived Yerevan and Karabakh of the benefits of energy transport. After the 1994 war, most of the economic relationships between Azerbaijan and Armenia and also between Turkey and Armenia ended, while the Nakhchivan corridor supports the relationships between Baku and Ankara (Crisis Group Europe, 2020, p. 11).

Another important factor contributing to the importance of the Caucasus region is the energy pipelines and transportation routes crossing Azerbaijan's Tovuz region, in which 10 conflicts have taken place so far.

More importantly, this region hosts the main oil pipelines (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan). The gas pipelines of Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum and the southern gas corridor as well as transportation routes of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroads and the East-West Transportation Corridor all connect Azerbaijan to Europe through Turkey and Georgia (Huseynov, 2020, p. 5).

Turkey with more than 80 million population and a developing economy, which ranks 17th in the global economy rankings, has faced a sharp increase in energy consumption, particularly after the Cold War. The statistics cited by Turkey's Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (MENR) show an increase in energy demands in this country. During the last decade, this demand has increased by six percent, which is the highest among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members and the second highest in the world after China (Erşena & Celikpala, 2019, p. 589).

Turkey's economy requires energy, which has a strong influence on the country's military power, regional influence, and national security. Therefore, securing energy resources is of paramount importance for Turkey's energy policy. Turkey's main goal for forming its energy policy is, first and foremost, increasing its own energy security. According to the strategic report released by Turkey's Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, energy security is a top priority for Turkey. Turkey tries to meet its energy demands from uninterrupted and constant resources with affordable prices. However, Turkey's increased energy demands, local resource scarcity, heavy dependence on imported oil and gas, inadequate capacity of national energy infrastructures, insufficient energy suppliers, and terrorist attacks on energy infrastructures, all are worries for Turkey's energy security (Yilmaz-Bozkus, 2018, p. 116).

Turkey imports about 75 percent of its primary energy, which is mainly oil and gas. During the first half of 2017, the dependence of the country on oil was estimated to be more than 92 percent, and for gas, it was about 99 percent.

Some of the strategic goals pursued by Turkey's Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources from 2014 to 2019 were reducing the dependency on imported energy, having energy security, and improving energy productivity. However, these were not the only goals, because reaching such goals can also have important geopolitical outcomes for Turkey. If the goals are achieved, Turkey can become an energy hub between Europe and Asia. This strategic goal has been highlighted in the official website of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Turkey aims to strengthen its position between East-West and South-North energy corridors." (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Increased domestic demands put Turkey under pressure to secure the provision of resources by taking an energy-security approach and by diversifying its energy suppliers (Bilgin, 2018, p. 70). Moreover, Turkey's ever-increasing energy demands have forced Ankara to cooperate in a couple of international energy pipeline projects. The increasing cooperation in international projects is not only good for being recognized as a transit country, but also as an excellent consumer (Alsancak, 2010, p. 106).

Turkey's geographical position in relation to the south Caucasus region is potentially considered as a means of increasing national power. However, actualizing some of these potentials depends on energy plans and energy pipelines in the south Caucasus region. Turkey's geographical position has made Turkey a suitable transit route for transporting the energy resources of the south Caucasus region to Europe (Fallahi & Vosoughi, 2020, p. 63).

The escalation of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis created a good opportunity for Turkey to reach its different strategic goals, especially the maintenance of energy security; also, Azerbaijan could increase its share in Turkey's market and thereby avoid dependence on Russia. It has been reported that from January to June of 2020, Azerbaijan exported 6.35 billion cubic meters of gas (23 percent of Turkey's entire gas purchase) and therefore is the main exporter of gas to Turkey (Garibov, 2020). During this time, the TAP (the Trans Adriatic Pipeline) was about to open, which connects Azerbaijan to Italy, passing through Georgia, Turkey, Greece, and Albania (Ergun & Aliyev, 2020, p. 4). Turkey is seeking to become the energy hub of the region and tries to make Turkey an important and reliable transit country of the region; also, Turkey cooperates in providing Europe's security of energy supplies through diversifying the resources and importing routes (Fallahi & Vosoughi, 2020, p. 65).

Conclusion

In this article, Turkey's strategic goals in the south Caucasus region based on the recent 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis were explored by adopting a realism approach. According to this school, countries are pursuing more interests, trying to obtain more power in order to secure their sovereignty. This is the essence of realism which justifies the use of economic and military power for accomplishing countries' goals. The anarchy of international relations and struggle for existence with regard to geopolitical priorities and countries' security, all lead to countries pursuing power and security both regionally and internationally.

The south Caucasus region, which gained strategic and geopolitical significance after the collapse of the Soviet Union mainly because of great energy resources, has caused considerable competition among countries for having access to the energy resources and for developing geopolitically.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has always tried to develop close ties with south Caucasus

countries, especially the Republic of Azerbaijan. With the escalation of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis, which continued for a couple of weeks and led to armed clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ankara's support of Baku increased considerably compared to previous conflicts. Turkey sent military equipment to Azerbaijan, including unmanned aerial vehicles, which were influential in determining the results of the conflicts in favor of Baku.

The focus of this article was an attempt to interpret Turkey's strategic goals in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis. Turkey's strategic goals in the recent crisis can be divided into three main targets: developing geopolitically, gaining and strengthening regional and international positions, and providing energy security. During the crisis, Ankara tried to develop close geopolitical ties with Baku to reduce Russia's influence on the region as well as Turkey's dependence on Russia's energy.

Turkey's second strategic goal in supporting Baku was gaining and strengthening regional and international positions or power. By active involvement in regional crises, such as the ones in Syria and Libya, Ankara had this message for the region and other powers such as the United States and the European Union that Turkey will not be indifferent to the crises which happen in the region, and has an influential role.

Turkey's third strategic goal, which has been considered the most important one in this article, is to provide, increase, and maintain the Turkey's energy security. Turkey's dependence on energy, scarcity of domestic energy resources, a sharp increase in Turkey's energy consumption, lower cost of energy transport from Azerbaijan as compared to Russia, and finally having a better position to transport energy to Europe, all made Turkey more willing to get involved in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis and support Azerbaijan. Additionally, some of the strategic goals pursued by Turkey's Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources from 2014 to 2019 were reducing the dependency on imported energy, having energy security, and improving energy productivity. Therefore, the goals of Turkey in supporting Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis were in line with its national interests. Based on the realism approach, pursuing these goals can be seen as a logical behavior and an understandable reaction from Turkey.

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