Erdogan’s ‘Neo-Ottomanism’ Reaches the Caucasus

In making his speeches on the on-going military conflict in the Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey’s Erdogan has not minced words in invoking the ‘Turkishness’ of the people of Azerbaijan and how protecting Azerbaijan falls within his definition of the revival Turkish glory of the Ottoman days. One crucial reason for why Turkey has started to jump in every conflict near and/or around its borders is the increasing appetite for reclaiming Turkey’s place in the world order as a strong state, capable of determining facts on the ground that no other state can change or deny. This is how Erdogan regime seems to rub aside the ‘sick man of Europe’ stigma attached to Turkey ever since its downfall after the first World War and the subsequent break up of the Ottoman empire into many countries. While Erdogan cannot recreate an empire today, he does want to reincarnate the same glory and place Ankara at the centre of regional geo-politics.

Instead of helping diffuse tensions, Ankara is actively sponsoring conflicts. Even while Azerbaijan may have legitimate concerns with regards to the disputed territory, Turkish active military sponsorship has already turned the dispute into a multi-lateral issue. Even before the conflict had started, Turkey was actively cultivating its military ties with Azerbaijan, taking it to new heights. It is not a simple coincidence that Turkey’s military exports to Azerbaijan rose six-fold this year, with sales of drones and other military equipment rising to US$77 million last month alone, just before fighting broke out over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The figures compiled by the Turkish Exporters’ Assembly show that Azerbaijan bought US$123 million in defence and aviation equipment from Turkey in the first nine months of 2020. Most of the purchases of drones, rocket launchers, ammunition and other weapons arrived were after July, when border clashes between Armenian and Azeri forces prompted Turkey and Azerbaijan to conduct joint military exercises.

It is clear that Azerbaijan turned to Turkey for help, realizing that large scale fighting may break out. Turkey, on the other hand, did not hesitate because the conflict presented it with yet another opportunity after Syria, Iraq, East Mediterranean, and Libya to insert itself deep into the region beyond its borders and carve out a space for itself in what its leadership sees an increasingly multipolar world with newly available enough space to erect a ‘Neo-Ottoman’ edifice for Turkey as well. Turkey’s increasing external military adventures are, in other words, not only a response to the fast-changing world where the US hegemony and dictation is no longer the final say, but also a reflection of the growing geo-political competition between different power-centers.

“Why is Turkey siding with Azerbaijan? You know about the Minsk trio: The United States, Russia and France. Whose side are they on? They are with Armenia. Do they give Armenia all sorts of armed support? Yes, they do,” Erdoğan told a provincial convention in the south-eastern province of Şırnak on Oct. 18. “We will be present where oppression exists,” Erdoğan further stated while criticizing the supposedly ‘oppressive’ role of certain power.

As such, whereas Turkey and Russia are closely allied in Syria and have been cooperating through the Astana and Sochi processes, they appear to be on the opposite side in Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict. This is because even for Russia, Turkeys’ expansion of its ‘Neo-Ottoman’ ideals to the Caucasus may not be acceptable. The reason for this unacceptability is not just Turkey’s increasing external interventions, but also the fact that Turkey’s involvement can lead and is leading to a surge in the number of Islamist fighters involved in the fighting in the Caucasus. Indeed, this was what Kremlin said Putin told Erdogan in their October 14 telephonic conversation.

This is not an unprecedented move. Even according to a Pentagon report, Turkey has a policy of enlisting Islamist fighters to advance its foreign-policy objectives. Earlier this year, according to the report, Ankara sent about 5,000
Syrian fighters to support the internationally recognized government in Libya’s civil war.

While Turkey has not yet confirmed the presence of these fighters in Azerbaijan, it has not even tried to hide their presence in Libya. In fact, Erdogan praised Syrians fighting in Libya under the supervision of Turkish military advisers, saying “These brothers who are with us consider this togetherness an honor for themselves.” “There is a spiritual dimension for them in going [to Libya]”, he added.

Given the emphasis Erdogan regime has been putting on the ‘Turkic identity’ of the people of Azerbaijan, it is quite possible that for the fighters, fighting in Azerbaijan will have an ethnic dimension as well. Given that the people of Azerbaijan are, as Erdogan said, “brothers of the people of Turkey”, the Islamist fighters will be fighting for the cause of their own kin.

For Russia, the presence of these fighters is a matter of real concern, one that can really undermine the overall security situation of the whole Central Asia and the Caucasus.

But sending these fighters to the Caucasus makes sense for Erdogan’s combative policies, his taste for gunboat diplomacy and the belief that flexing his military muscle allows him to force himself at the table with the big powers. This is how the Ottomans before the Word War One operated in the world; this is what the ‘Neo-Ottoman’ should do again.

However, While Erdogan’s expansion would further destabilize Turkey’s ties with NATO, it will also put its relations with Russia in an increasingly competitive regional framework.

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