

By Katia Zatuliveter, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

After many months of negotiations, on Saturday 10th October 2009 Armenian and Turkish representatives met in Zurich and signed two documents: the Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and the Protocol on Development of Relations between the two countries. This happened just 4 days before the 14 October World Cup qualifier match between Armenia and Turkey.

Although, both parties (along with the Swiss mediators who helped to draft the Protocols) seem to be content with the outcome, the interests of another player, Azerbaijan, were not completely satisfied. Even though Azerbaijani representatives who were in Zurich at the signing of the protocols were assured by the Turks that without the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh, the opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia will not happen, this pre-condition was not included in the protocols.

The protocols are yet to be ratified by Turkish and Armenian parliaments, and this is where Azerbaijan might attempt to ensure that the protocols are not ratified in the Turkish Meclis.

The border between Turkey and Armenia has been closed since 1993 following the Armenian occupation of the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. This left Armenia almost isolated. The announcements a few months ago by both Ankara and Yerevan (with the US pressure on Turkey and Russian pressure on Armenia) about opening the borders and restoring diplomatic relations came as surprise to the international community.

Since the talks about the opening of the border began, there have been many sceptics who did not believe that a breakthrough would be achieved. However, analysing what different players in this diplomatic "game" can gain and loose if the border is open shows why such a complicated issue is rushing towards a possible resolution.

Turkey GAINS

- prospects of EU membership;
- possibility to become the Nagorno-Karabakh mediator;
- the necessity to recognise as genocide the events of 1915 will be lifted;
- overall regional leverage of Turkey will significantly increase.

but LOOSES

- possible deterioration of relations with Azerbaijan;
- potential problems with Nabucco pipeline project

Armenia GAINS

- economic development;
- lifting of the condition to withdraw from the Nagorno-Karabakh.

Russia GAINS

- development of its businesses in Armenia;
- possible deterioration of Azeri-Turkish relations will lead to closer cooperation with Azerbaijan, especially on energy issues;

but LOSES

- support of the border opening might lead to the deterioration of the relations with Azerbaijan, the most needed partner after broke down with Turkmenistan;
- less influence on Armenia;
- decrease of Russia's monopoly on the dominant military policy in the region.

Azerbaijan GAINS

- possibility of Turkey joining co-chairs of the Minsk Group or leading of its own peace process

but LOSES

- possible deterioration of relations with Turkey.

It is easy to see that for both Turkey and Armenia there are more advantages than disadvantages in restoring their relations and opening of the border. The stakes are, however, much higher for Turkey. Potentially its leverage in the region will increase significantly, but the relations with its ally Azerbaijan and, as a consequence, a further delay in the implementation of the Nabucco project will force the Turkish government to think through its decision very carefully.

Membership in the European Union has been one of the priorities of the Turkish international politics for many years. France, one of the main countries opposing this membership, has developed very close relations with Armenia. If the border between Armenia and Turkey is open and diplomatic relations restored, Armenia would have the means and the political will to back the negotiation process for Turkish membership of the EU, which could lead to a U-turn in the

French position. There are of course many other issues that keep Turkish membership of the EU deadlocked, but any change in position by the main opponent will give the EU a chance to look differently at this situation.

The main concern spelled out by Baku is the absence of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in the negotiations between Turkey and Armenia, and now also in the signed Protocols, while the main Armenian objective is to separate the issue of the border opening from the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Taking into account that the border was closed due to the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani concerns are logical.

As Armenian newspaper Hayots Ashkharh reported "the primary issue of the Armenian diplomacy should be "to win time" until the clash of the super powers' interests over the energy resources will again destroy the mediators' alleged and tactical unity around the Karabakh issue."

Armenia believes Turkey has moved the solution of the Karabakh issue from the list of issues to be settled with Armenia to the list of issues to be resolved within the framework of the Minsk Group, which is conducted in parallel with the Armenian-Turkish dialogue.

Baku has shown its discontent with the issue very clearly. In April 2009 the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliev declined both an invitation to the Alliance of Civilizations Forum in Istanbul, as well as a chance to meet US President Barack Obama to discuss a solution to the Karabakh problem and energy issues.

The architect of the "new" Armenian policy in Turkey is Ali Babacan, who favoured the non-inclusion of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in the negotiations, and was "moved" from his position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of Finance shortly after Azerbaijan raised their concerns.

Close allies Turkey and Azerbaijan already had a few issues prior to the Turkey-Armenia settlement. Those issues concern the still embryonic Nabucco pipeline. Turkey demands 15% of all future transit of gas via its territory, while Baku believes this percentage is too high. Turkey would like to buy Azerbaijani gas for \$120 per 1 bcm, only one third of the world market price. If Ankara goes ahead with the border opening, Baku will most definitely increase the gas price for Turkey dramatically.

A lot will depend on the extent to which relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey deteriorate. Even if only symbolically, potential Turkish mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will change the situation for the better, and Nabucco will experience less troubles, leaving Turkey as a main winner. However, if the relationship deteriorates dramatically, it would even lead to talk about scrapping Nabucco plans and alternative Azerbaijani cooperation with Russia on South Stream.

Russia might lose more than it would gain, especially politically, while the economic advantage is evident. However, the official Kremlin position is in favour of the border opening.

Russia and Turkey have good relations, strengthened by economic and military cooperation. Turkey was the first NATO country with which Russia established ties in this area in 1992. Opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia would in this respect promote trade and economic cooperation between the Armenia-based Russian businesses in Turkey.

The strong Armenian lobby in Washington has ensured that American politicians know little about the link of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to the Turkish-Armenian relations. The political debate about this region in the US is overwhelmed with the so called Armenian question. As a result, the US sees only half of the picture and is unable to undertake a thorough analysis of the situation.

However, Nagorno-Karabakh is only one of the problems in the relations between Armenia and Turkey. Armenia wishes to make Turkey recognise the events of the 1915 as genocide against the Armenians committed by the Ottoman Empire. This issue, however, was not on the agenda during the on-going negotiations, which helped Turkey and Armenia to move forward. It is even possible that Armenia might completely lift this condition from Turkey.

Logically, the opening of borders between Turkey and Armenia and resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh will facilitate the energy projects and will decrease the cost of pipelines as the direct distance of pipelines from Azerbaijan to Turkey via Armenia is much shorter than bypassing Armenia via Georgia.

In such a way, the opening of the border will give many benefits to Turkey and Armenia. The pressure from the USA on Turkey to make first steps in reconciliation with Armenia, Russian interest to bring its Armenian-based businesses to Turkey and the well-organised Swiss mediators, all contributed to the recent signing of the Protocols on the Establishment and Development of Diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey. If the Azerbaijani efforts are not successful and the Protocols are ratified by both parliaments, the border will be open within 2 months after ratification and the geopolitics of the region will change out of all recognition.