

# US Conflict Resolution Policy Backfires in Yerevan

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The US State Department seems disappointed, but not entirely surprised, by Yerevan's April 22 suspension of Armenian-Turkish "normalization." Assistant Secretary of State, Philip Gordon, in charge of this policy, finds solace in Armenian President, Serzh Sargsyan's decision to suspend, rather than terminate the effort; and hopes that Yerevan would continue to cooperate with the US-driven process goal. Gordon as well as State Department Spokesman, Philip Crowley, argued that such normalization meets the interests of Armenia, Turkey, and other [unnamed] countries in the region (press releases cited by News.Az and Arminfo, April 23).

These statements, however, seem to ignore Azerbaijan's view and the change in Turkey's view. Inasmuch as the normalization focuses on opening the Turkish-Armenian border unconditionally, or no longer linked to a withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan's interior –Baku deemed it to be against its interests all along. Ankara had rallied to Baku's view last December already.

Since April 2009, US President, Barack Obama's administration has pressed for opening Turkey's border with Armenia unconditionally. Thus, the October 2009 Zurich protocols, strongly backed by the US, required Turkey to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and open the mutual border "without preconditions."

Washington's policy seems driven primarily by domestic politics. The administration hopes to remove the annual drama of Armenian genocide recognition from the center-stage of US politics. It seeks its way out of the dilemma of losing Turkey versus any loss of the US Armenian vote. "Normalization" of Turkish-Armenian relations, centered on the re-opening of that border, was offered as a substitute for the unfulfilled electoral-campaign promises to recognize an Armenian genocide in Ottoman Turkey.

Washington's normalization concept, however, has also turned out to be unfulfilled. Tilting sharply in Armenia's favor at Azerbaijan's expense, it backfired first in Azerbaijan and shortly afterward in Turkey. Instead of de-aligning Ankara from Baku, as seemed briefly possible, it led Turkey and Azerbaijan to close ranks against an unconditional "normalization" of Turkish-Armenian relations, prior to a first-stage withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan.

The US initiative seemed unrelated to any regional strategy in the South Caucasus. It actually coincided with an overall reduction of US engagement in that region, downgrading the earlier goals of conflict-resolution and promotion of energy projects. Moreover, it risked splitting its strategic partner Azerbaijan from Turkey, compromising the basis for a subsequent return to an active US policy in the region.

Previous US administrations had also proposed to open the Turkish-Armenian border, but never as a goal in itself, unconditionally, or by some deadline in the political calendar, as has most recently been the case. Moreover, those earlier discussions considered opening both the Turkish and Azeri borders with Armenia, as part of an overall settlement, without dividing

Ankara and Baku from each other on that account. Those border-opening proposals were being discussed as one element in comprehensive negotiations toward stage-by-stage resolution of the Armenian-Azeri conflict, and in conditional linkage with Armenian troop withdrawal from inner-Azeri districts, again in contrast to Washington's recent proposals.

Yet, there is an element of continuity between those earlier border-opening proposals and the latest one. That common element is the optimistic belief that open borders and freedom to trade are a prerequisite to resolution of conflict and durable peace. This carryover from Manchesterianism often colored US political debates about the possibility of opening the Azeri and Turkish borders with Armenia. Yet, the diplomatic process integrated this issue within the broader negotiations. It did not single it out from that context or allow it to become a currency of exchange in US domestic politics.

The logic of the administration's initiative from 2009 to date has implied that Washington would "deliver" the re-opening of Turkey's border with Armenia; while Turkey would in turn "deliver" Azerbaijan by opening the Turkish-Armenian border, without insisting on the withdrawal of Armenian troops from inner-Azeri territories. That conditionality is a long-established one in these negotiations. However, Washington currently insists that the two processes be separated and that Turkey opens that border unconditionally as per the October 2009 Zurich protocols.

Breaking that linkage would irreparably compromise the chances of a peaceful, stage-by-stage settlement of the Armenian-Azeri conflict. It would indefinitely prolong the Armenian military presence inside Azerbaijan, placing Russia in a commanding position to arbitrate the conflict, with unprecedented leverage on an Azerbaijan alienated from its strategic allies.

Washington had persuaded Ankara to break that conditionality in the October 2009 protocols, which came close to splitting Turkey from Azerbaijan. However, Turkey reinstated that conditionality unambiguously from December 2009 onward. Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, declared this repeatedly and publicly, contradicting Obama and the US State Department on this account at the December 2009 and April 2010 Washington summits and afterward. Following the latter event, Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, flew to Baku with reassurances that Turkey would only open the border with Armenia if Armenian troops withdrew from inner-Azeri districts. The assurances were the more significant after the US White House had demonstratively excluded Azerbaijan from the Washington summit (Anatolia News Agency, April 14, 18-20).

The US administration's policy has now backfired on all sides, Yerevan being the last to abandon it after the policy had failed to "deliver" Ankara and Baku. The Obama administration can now be expected to revert to a balanced approach by taking Azeri and Turkish views more carefully into account.