



PERSPECTIVES

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Turkey vs. the Southern Caucasus Republics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On October 13, 1921, the Kars Agreement was signed in the town of Kars in eastern Anatolia (Western Armenia). This agreement redrew, in Turkey's favor, the Kars-Ardahan-Artvin border between Turkey and the Caucasus republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, an area that had been stripped from Turkey by the post-WWI Sèvres peace treaty. While there are irredentist trends in the now independent Caucasian republics that wish to invalidate the Turkish claim, they are being restrained by present day realities.

The Sèvres Agreement (August 10, 1920), which partitioned the territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire, delineated *inter alia* the border between the newly born Turkish state and its northeastern neighbors, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The agreement was not favorable to Turkey, which had lost the Kars region to Christian domination (Georgia and Armenia).

Through shrewd diplomacy, Turkish statesmen managed to reverse this. The young Soviet regime at the time was desperate to achieve international recognition of its legitimacy, and was therefore ready to turn the area back over to Turkey in exchange for recognition. This arrangement was formalized in the Moscow Agreement of March 16, 1921. The loss of these lands was not particularly painful to Moscow as they were not Russian territories but Armenian and Georgian. Georgia and Armenia (Azerbaijan was party to the agreement too, but further to the east) were embroiled in an agonizing Sovietization process that was creating a great deal of internal strife, so they were in no position to resist dictates that were coming from Moscow at their expense.

In 1945, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin and deputy premier Lavrentiy Beria, both of whom were Georgian by nationality, attempted to regain these lost provinces. They refused to renew the 1925 twenty-year Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, declaring that a renewal could take place only after Georgian and Armenian claims to the Turkish-controlled territories had been resolved. This effort lasted until Stalin's death in 1953. It failed due to Turkey's incorporation into NATO and the support it subsequently received from other NATO members, especially the US, which withdrew its support for the Armenian claim on the pretext that Armenia had lost its independence when it was incorporated into the USSR.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the reemergence of the independent states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, this simmering issue resurfaced.

Several revisionist claims circulate today that purport to undermine the validity of the Kars Agreement, which was signed on October 13, 1921 as a continuation of the Moscow Agreement. They include the following:

- The agreement expired in 1945 with the end of the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality (which has never been renewed).
- The main signatories to the treaty, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, are defunct political entities, so the agreement is no longer binding.
- Non-independent Georgia and non-independent Armenia, which bore the brunt of the agreement, had been coerced into complying.
- The terms of the treaty, which stipulates Turkish control over Kars-Artvin-Ardehan, contradict the terms of Sèvres (though the latter was virtually undone by the Lausanne Treaty of July 24, 1923).

The situation in the South Caucasus today

Azerbaijan: Two of the three independent South Caucasus states, Azerbaijan and Georgia, have an interest in maintaining the present-day status quo regarding their borders with Turkey. By the terms of the Kars Agreement, the Nakhchivan district (5,500 square kilometers, population of 444,000) was created as an autonomous exclave under the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which did not have to cede territory to Turkey. Azerbaijani-Turkish relations have always been strong and warm, to the point that they are sometimes defined as “one nation with two states.” The two states’ ongoing energy relations, in addition to Ankara’s backing of the Azerbaijani position on the Nagorno Karabakh issue, ensure that the Republic of

Azerbaijan, which was one of the signatories to the Kars Agreement, will continue to endorse the pro-Turkish terms of the agreement.

Georgia: Georgia had to cede Artvin to Turkey in accordance with the Kars Agreement, but won back the Adjara area around Batumi as an autonomous republic within the borders of Georgia. Due to the much greater economic importance of the Adjara area compared to Artvin, and to the ongoing attempt of Georgian authorities of all political stripes to foster closer relations with Turkey, Georgia will prefer to avoid any sort of revision of the terms of the Kars Agreement as it approaches its 100th anniversary.

Armenia: According to the terms of the Kars Agreement imposed upon Armenia by Moscow, the country lost half its territory to Turkey (western Armenia) as it had been defined by the Sèvres treaty. Armenia's attempt to regain these territories via the Soviet Union in 1945-53 not only failed, but caused the loss of western backing for the Armenian cause. The irredentist call for a revision of the Kars Agreement is therefore loudest in Armenia, stemming mainly from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak).

However, due to Armenia's lack of political stability (PM Serzh Sargsyan had to resign on April 23, 2018 after large-scale public protests regarding the ongoing military conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh [Artsakh]), the business-oriented *realpolitik* attitude of the majority parties in the Armenian national assembly (the Republican party had 49.17% of the vote in the 2017 elections and the Tsarukyan bloc had 27.35%, compared to 6.58% for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation), and the renewed influence of Moscow, which has its own vested interest in fostering relations with Turkey, it seems unrealistic to expect the call for revision of the Kars Agreement to prevail.

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