

CENTRAL ASIA SLIPS AWAY FROM TURKEY

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Zülfikar Doğan, [Al-Monitor](#), 6 January 2016

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(L-R) Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan, Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev stand during a meeting of the heads of state of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council at the Burabai resort near Astana, Kazakhstan, Oct. 16, 2015. (photo by REUTERS/Aleksey Nikolskyi)

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Armenia holds the term presidency of the CIS-Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military

alliance of former Soviet republics. The military chiefs of member states met before the gathering of heads of state to hear their term chairman, Gen. Yuri Khachaturov, Armenian chief of the General Staff, harshly criticize Turkey. Khachaturov noted, "Chiefs of staff of all member states of the organization supported the Russian actions and denounced Turkey's attack against the Su-24 plane that was seen as an incendiary, shameless aggression. As Russia said immediately after the attack, we also saw it as a stab in the back."

Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, term chairman of CIS, also asked the summit to express its support for Russia and denounce Turkey. He said, "As member states, we declared our support for the Russian position and decided to urgently declare unity to combat terror. Turkey's attitude and its shooting down of the Russian plane have been a setback to the struggle against terror."

The real shock for Ankara was not Sargsyan's words, but those of the Kyrgyzstan head of state, President Almazbek Atambayev, who in the past had addressed Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as "my older brother." After the August 2014 presidential elections, Atambayev had appeared with Erdogan, who was delivering his victory speech, and lavishly praised him. At the CIS summit, Atambayev expressed support for Moscow and President Vladimir Putin and suggested Erdogan and Turkey apologize to Russia.

The support for Russia among the Central Asian Turkic republics, which have received billions of dollars of credit and financing support from Turkey, and Atambayev's call for an apology shocked Turkey, disillusioning Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party government. In 2014, the Cooperation and Coordination Agency of Turkey had provided the republics more than \$3.5 billion. When asked about Atambayev's comment, Erdogan spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin said, "If nothing else, it was an unfortunate statement."

Russia's freeze on issuing transit permits to Turkish truckers in October has severely disrupted Turkish exports to the Central Asian republics. Concerned with the prospect of losing the Central Asian market, where Turkey has sizable construction contracts and investments, Ankara began using the Caspian Sea for its exports thanks to Azerbaijan opening its gates.

Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, ordered that Caspian port capacity be increased and transit documents waived for Turkish trucks. Even if Turkish truck traffic through the Caspian reaches 50,000 a year, it would still fall far short of sustaining exports to the Central Asian market.

With the sharp decline in oil and natural gas prices, Azerbaijan had to devalue its currency 47% against the dollar and euro. Given the economic bottlenecks it faces, no one can be sure that the country can indefinitely be a contributor in regard to Turkey's commercial and energy needs.

Moreover, an Aliyev-Sargsyan meeting in Switzerland Dec. 19 did not yield a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. Instead, both countries announced that their cease-fire had ended. This development greatly concerns Turkey, because it could negatively affect its use of the Azerbaijani route for its exports. Meanwhile, Russia and Armenia, which have been boosting political and

economic links, in late December decided to also expand their military cooperation.

In mid-December, Putin announced that visa requirements for Georgian nationals would be eased and soon thereafter abolished. It has become clear that the Russian-Armenian air defense agreement, normalization of Russian-Georgian relations and resumption of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia will impede Turkey's access to the Caucasus. There are also fears that Russia, which has been firing cruise missiles from its navy based in the Caspian, could block passage through that sea, severely restricting Turkey's access to Central Asia via that route.

Russia also made use of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to move against Turkey's relations with the Turkic republics. Turkey-EEU negotiations to establish a free trade zone were suspended, and instead, Putin announced, the EEU would enter into talks with Iran. Thus, Russia is helping advance Iranian economic interests in Central Asia by closing the doors on Turkey advocating a customs union and regional free trade. No doubt, this brought Turkey one step closer to losing Central Asia in the wake of its isolation in the Middle East.

Zülfikar Doğan began his career in journalism in 1976 at the Yanki news magazine in Ankara. He has worked as a reporter, news editor, representative and columnist at Milliyet, Posta, Aksam, Finansal Forum, Star and Karsi newspapers, and as a TV programmer and commentator on the economy and politics for TRT-1, Star, NTV and CNBC-e. He is currently editor in chief and columnist at the Korhaber news site.

