

Flags of peace in the Caspian Sea?

Sometimes it is hard to determine the direction towards which flags are waving. And, it is even harder to estimate the role of the posts that hold the flags in this waving. So, the direction towards which the Turkmenistan flag will wave in the Caspian Sea has always been uncertain and generally flexible.

Turkmenistan's attitude towards the Caspian Sea has been less certain and more flexible than that of other riparian countries. Due to pressure from Russia and Iran, Turkmenistan took an attitude akin to that of these countries until January 1997. It supported the view that an open area should be allocated for the common use of riparian countries apart from the exclusive jurisdiction of 45 miles which will be left to riparian countries. In the same month, Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov changed the names of Azeri and Chirak oil fields which were determined by Azerbaijan, and gave them his own name. Since these oil fields were beyond the 45 miles of coastline, it can be said that Turkmenistan supported the virtual division of the Caspian Sea into national sectors. But what is interesting was that Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, who started to support the same view about the Caspian Sea, had a disagreement because of the oil fields.

This disagreement augmented, and the tension between the two countries was made explicit when Azerbaijan's claimed gas debt to Turkmenistan remaining from the time of the Soviet Union was revived. The rise of the tension was inevitable when issues like natural resources of Caspian region, claims of Azerbaijan's debt to Turkmenistan (as well as disputes over the amount of the debt), and the conditions of the carrying of Turkmenistan's natural gas over Azerbaijan via the Trans-Caspian Oil Pipeline added to the not-too-good relations between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

During this process of tension, the embassy of Turkmenistan which was opened in Baku on June 8, 1999 stopped operating in June 4, 2001 because of the “inadequate financial payment of the Ministry”, according to the official statement by Turkmenistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the ambassador withdrew from Ashgabat. Apart from this, Turkmenistan supported Azerbaijan’s attitude in the negotiations and polls held within the body of UN and OSCE about the Karabagh problem (the invasion of Azerbaijani lands by Armenia), but it withdrew its support between the years 1996–1997 and 2000–2002.

The peak of the tension was reached one year after Turkmenistan’s cancelling its embassy in Baku. In the opening speech of the Caspian Summit held in April 2002 in Ashgabat, Niyazov stated that “The Caspian Sea started to smell of blood because of Azerbaijan’s attitudes.” Although Heydar Aliyev took a more cautious attitude, he claimed that the (disputed) areas which Turkmenistan claimed to own belonged to Azerbaijan.

There were times when the flag waved in positive directions, though. For instance, on October 29, 2004, Turkmenistan supported the negotiation of the report named “Azerbaijan’s position in the invaded lands” in the UN General Assembly. Azerbaijan also sent a letter of thanks to Turkmenistan because of their support.

On December 22, 2006, following the death of President Niyazov, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev sent a letter of condolence to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow who was the President by proxy in that period and later became the official President. A crowded delegation from Azerbaijan also attended to the funeral ceremony. These developments were seen as the first steps of the two countries’ giving positive messages to each other. Later on, official visits from both presidents and ministries from two countries and mutual agreements started to indicate that flags of peace started to wave in the Caspian Sea.

Turkmenistan's president's bringing democracy and innovations to his country, though very little, and his pursuing more moderate policies towards neighbouring and riparian countries was not overlooked. However, rumours that Turkmenistan would complain Azerbaijan to the International Court of Justice about the oil fields disputed between the two countries, namely Azeri, Chirak, Kapaz/Serdar, created tension.

Azerbaijani authorities had offered Turkmenistan to cooperate in Kapaz/Serdar before, but this offer was rejected by Turkmenistan. As to the Azeri and Chirac oil fields, Azerbaijani authorities made all their research before the "Agreement of the Century" dated 1994, and no legal ambiguities were found.

In the recent periods, a more positive process is observed. Statements of Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Hale Həlefovun and Turkmen authorities that they will try to solve this matter by lawful methods and without damaging the relations between the two countries indicate the positive approaches of the two states. Indeed, in addition to the values shared by the two countries, opportunities concerning the production and transfer to international markets of the energy resources in the region, the importance of the East-West Corridor (NABUCCO and similar projects) and other issues make continuous relations between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan inevitable.

After all that happened from their independence up to the present, it can be seen that these two riparian countries are recently waving flags of peace. In order for this situation to be permanent, the two countries shall exhibit attitudes appropriate for democratic, legal and mutual rights. An opposite attitude will bring about results that will serve only the interests of regional and extra regional third party countries which seek to benefit from the conflict between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.