



Editorial

Aliyev Invites Kocharian

Global Strategies Shape Regional Developments

By Hratch Tchilingirian

When recently Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev invited Armenian President Robert Kocharian to attend a European Union sponsored international conference in Baku, to discuss prospects for the successful implementation of the TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) program, many

observers and analysts were caught off guard.

In Armenia, the "surprise" invitation caused speculation on the real political motives of Azerbaijan. Some think the invitation is a diplomatic trap for Armenia, intended to embarrass the Kocharian administration and score political points for Aliyev. Other circles express concern for the security of Armenian officials visiting Baku. And political opportunists interpret the invitation as further indication of Armenia's "diplomatic weakness."

However, a closer look at the processes involved in convening multinational conferences and EU's strategic policies in the region indicate that Azerbaijan's invitation is more problematic for President Aliyev than Armenia. There are several important reasons for this:

President Aliyev's choices were slim. As in the case of virtually all other regional and international conferences organized by multinational bodies or regional clubs, the host country president is expected by protocol to invite the heads of state of all participating countries. Armenia is a constituent member of TRACECA. The organizer (EU), not the host (Azerbaijan), decides the "list of invitees." Ironically, the idea to host the conference in Baku was proposed in September 1997 by Presidents Aliyev and Shevardnadze of Georgia. At the time change of leadership in Armenia was the least expected development in the region and, perhaps, Azerbaijan had high hopes that the Karabagh conflict would be resolved by now.

As indicated by the protest of Azerbaijan's opposition parties, the invitation and Armenia's acceptance of the invitation is a negative political matter for Aliyev. It is common election campaign wisdom that one does not invite the President of a country who is considered a "war criminal" in Azerbaijan a few weeks before presidential elections, especially when one is running for re-election.

The invitation puts a dent in Azerbaijan's policy to isolate Armenia in regional strategic and economic developments. This is the first time that Baku, most probably against its wishes, extends an invitation to the President of Armenia for an official visit to Azerbaijan, albeit for an international conference. The most recent example of Azerbaijan's policy on high level visitations was its refusal to send a representative to BSEC's (Black Sea Economic Cooperation) April 30 meeting in Yerevan, where foreign ministers of the participating countries initiated a Charter on upgrading the BSEC's status. At the Yerevan conference Azerbaijan was scheduled to take over the rotating chairmanship of the BSEC. It did not. It would have meant hosting the next

BSEC conference in Baku and inviting Armenia. The chairmanship was passed to Bulgaria.

Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan has consistently insisted that any regional economic, transportation and related cooperation involving Armenia and Azerbaijan is dependent on the resolution of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict. Baku's invitation implies an exception to this. Participation in and implementation of the TRACECA program would involve cooperation among the countries of the region, at the least indirect cooperation among the three South Caucasus republics.

The TRACECA program its context, dimension and implementation has great significant for all the parties involved, especially the South Caucasus republics. A closer look at EU's strategic policies and programs in the region further indicate that building infrastructure and creating better economic environment are strong foundations for the resolution of regional conflicts and the establishment of mutually beneficial relations.

The TRACECA Program was launched by the European Union (EU) at a conference in Brussels in May 1993 which brought together trade and transport ministers from eight of the TRACECA countries: five Central Asian republics, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The conference agreed to implement an EU-funded program for technical assistance to develop a transport corridor on a West-East axis from Europe, across the Black Sea, through the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea to Central Asia.

The EU offered this program as an additional route that would complement all traditional routes. It is part of EU's strategy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The TRACECA route – the shortest distance and potentially the fastest and cheapest route from Central Asia to deep-sea ships serving world markets – would establishes an alternative transport outlet to Europe and would complement the traditional and often heavily overloaded route via Russia.

Already several working group meetings have taken place since the establishment of the program (Almaty and Vienna 1995; Venice and Athens 1996). The most recent meeting was held in Tbilisi, in May 1998, where 14 new projects for 1998-99 were proposed by the European Commission and endorsed by the beneficiary countries. There are also plans to link the TRACECA route with the Black Sea region and the Trans-European Networks.

Working closely with the World Bank, EBRD and international financial institutions, TRACECA has already implemented several important projects involving upgrading and rehabilitation of roads and highways (Armenia, Georgia, Turkmenistan) and upgrading and construction of ports (Georgia and Azerbaijan).

Other TRACECA projects involve the rehabilitation of the Caucasian Railways (a 7.5 kilometer track in Georgia, the reparation of a section on the Armenian-Georgian border and the rehabilitation of a bridge at the Azeri-Georgian border). As for air transportation, the TRACECA has an Air Traffic Control (ATC) Training and Southern Ring Air Routes project. This involves 10 countries in the region to upgrade their ATC capabilities and to support the establishment of a work plan for routes to be adapted by airlines. The project includes a feasibility study for the three national Caucasian airlines (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) to set up a joint venture for regional flights with investment opportunities for private European investors.

Of particular importance to Armenia is the reconstruction of a Iran-Armenia-Georgia highway. Armenian-American billionaire Kirk Kerkorian has already donated a significant part of the cost (\$85 million). The rest is expected to come from the European Union.

When Armenian Prime Minister Armen Darbinian heads a delegation to Baku to participate in the EU's conference scheduled for September 7-8, this will be the first Armenian high-level official visit to Azerbaijan. The political implications of such a visit, both for Azerbaijan and Armenia, remain to be seen.

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