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#3: Armenian-Turkish relations as a field of diplomatic competition: Playing football on a chessboard

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The use of sport as a tool of public diplomacy can demonstrate a desire to promote democratic values, international cooperation, and world peace. In sports diplomacy, the people involved in international sports and sports events are used to create and convey to the foreign public a positive image of their country in order to form a more favorable perception, which contributes to the achievement of the country's foreign policy goals. The emergence of various types of sports diplomacy in scientific discourse has reflected the changes that have taken place and are still taking place in international relations. In the international arena, non-state actors and civil society organizations, transnational corporations and even famous individuals are becoming more and more influential, and members of government have to connect with them, regardless of whether governments recognize these actors as participants in international relations or not. Sports diplomacy is a logical consequence of the development of the world order. Yet, there is a contradiction in the essence of sports diplomacy due to the fact that sports and diplomacy are by their nature, at first glance, opposite concepts: diplomacy is aimed at cooperation, reaching agreement with mutual recognition of the equality of the parties, while in sports competitions the main goal is to prove one's superiority over the opponent and win. However, in reality, for the implementation of sports interaction, the joint work of sports administrators, coaches and diplomats is necessary, which can ultimately contribute to friendship in relations between officials and citizens of specific countries.

In Armenian-Turkish relations, chess, football, and other sports are becoming a field of diplomatic competition. The similarity of all sports is especially evident when it comes to a diplomatic analysis of the games played between the Armenian and Turkish teams.

For example, the World Cup qualifying football matches between the national teams of Armenia and Turkey in 2008 and 2009 contributed to the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. The first positive sign was on 6 September 2008, when former Turkish President Abdullah Gul first arrived in Yerevan at the invitation of former Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, and attended the match between their countries' national teams. The second



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positive sign was the visit of the President of Armenia at the invitation of the President of Turkey to come to the return Turkey-Armenia match, which took place on 14 October 2009. Before, during, and after the football matches, negotiations between the Armenian and Turkish delegations took place both in Yerevan and in Bursa, followed by a meeting of the presidents.

During the football matches between the teams of Armenia and Turkey, everyone concentrated their attention exclusively on the zone where the ball was located. But, key events take place in other zones. In fact, football players trying to deliver the ball to the opponent's goal do this precisely through open spaces, which in turn are formed due to the movement of the other players on the field. The location of the ball is just the starting point from which the most interesting events in the game begin, and which, to a greater extent, depend on what happens outside the zone where the ball is located. Likewise, peripheral zones and activities are just as important to diplomatic relations and competition.

On 10 October 2009 in Zurich, the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Turkey signed Protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and on the development of bilateral relations, as well as the timetable of their implementation. The Zurich Protocols were supposed to be ratified by the parliaments of the two countries; however, due to pressure from different actors in both countries, the process of ratification of the protocols was actually suspended, and thereby froze entirely.

The First President of Armenia Ter-Petrosyan stated the following in an interview with Newsweek Türkiye on 1 December 2008: "I am not much interested in the assessment of my own policies regarding the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations, nor do I bemoan the fact that my efforts are gaining acceptance after so much delay. I only feel sorry that so much time and so many opportunities were wasted. If the Armenian authorities are sincerely trying to recover those losses, I can only express my satisfaction and approval."^[1] In this context, it is important to note that the First President of Armenia asked the public a question: how should the conflict be resolved - through war or negotiations? He understood that someday it would be impossible to maintain the status quo around Nagorno-Karabakh and this situation would be temporary. Therefore, he believed that it was beneficial for Karabakh and Armenia to settle the situation around Nagorno-Karabakh on the basis of negotiations, and to resolve all problems with Turkey and Azerbaijan on the basis of a compromise. To this end, over 10 years prior he wrote an article that almost all Armenian newspapers published on 1 November 1997 entitled, "War or peace? Time to get serious." This article is still the most serious and comparative analysis of the complex settlement of the conflict. Ter-Petrosyan was aware that a compromise has no alternative, since the alternative to a compromise is war. This situation should be resolved only through peaceful negotiations since the unsettled situation is not beneficial to Nagorno-Karabakh or to Armenia, which significantly hinders the social and economic development of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Despite the enormous efforts of the EU and the USA to help normalize Armenian-Turkish relations, Turkey nevertheless refused to restore diplomatic relations with Armenia without preconditions, linking the Zurich Protocols with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Unfortunately, not all countries in the region trust the readiness of the EU and the USA to assist in the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations since this is not so much a bilateral issue as it is



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multilateral. Recent events such as the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia, the intensification of democratic reforms, and the processes of European integration of Armenia have shown that regional stability is not always beneficial for Russia militarily, politically, or economically. Evidence shows that as soon as the political will and the possibility of reaching agreement with Turkey were signaled by the ruling elites of Armenia, Russia would immediately join the dialogue and, under pretext, promote regional cooperation; however, with the involvement from Russia, normalization became more complicated and further contradictions arose. Rather than serving a purpose similar to a referee in a football match, this involvement created additional obstacles instead of promoting a solution of the conflict.

Since these complications and contradictions occurred after negotiations were underway, and given that football matches opened the door for a rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey, I aim to analyze the so-called Armenian-Turkish football diplomacy from the resilience perspective. Applying the resilience concept to a case of diplomatic competition can encapsulate and better inform the multi-dimensional international relations context, which I would visually describe like playing football on a chessboard. Although diplomatic advice does not typically involve a ball, it can be similar to advice about how to look at a football match in order to see the movements of players who do not have possession of the ball.

The most interesting thing in a game happens in the minds of the players who are constantly calculating many variations and making predictions about where to go next, whether they have control of the ball or not. The most resilient, sustainable moves on the football field and on the chessboard are those that best calculate many steps ahead – just like the back-and-forth match of diplomatic competition.

Endnote

[1] Ter-Petrosian, Levon. 2018. "The Politics and Geopolitics of the Process of Normalization of Armenian-Turkish Relations." In *Armenia's Future, Relations with Turkey, and the Karabagh Conflict*, edited by Arman Grigoryan, 79-129. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58916-9_6.



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