

Georgia vs Russia: Fanning the flames

Written by Eric Walberg
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Will there be another war in the Caucasus? This is a smoldering issue on more than one front, finds Eric Walberg, in the first of a two-part analysis of the spectre of war in this strategic crossroads

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world expected a new era of peace and disarmament. But what happened? Instead of diminishing, US and NATO presence throughout Europe, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Central Asia rapidly increased, and the world experienced one war after another -- in the



Caucasus, Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan, each one hotter and more horrible than the last. And we are far from seeing the end to the savagery now unleashed by the anti-communist jinni.

Though a pokey backwater for the past millennium, the south Caucasus is now a key battleground, the “critical strategic crossroads in 21st century geopolitics”, writes analyst Rick Rozoff, the focus of ambitious energy transit projects and a military corridor reaching from Western Europe to East Asia, controlled (or not so “controlled”) from Washington and Brussels.

Surely peace in this vital region should be a paramount goal for both Russia and the West, for their own reasons -- Russia because, well because it is there and its cultural and economic links are vital to Russia’s well being. The US, if only to benefit economically, since peace everywhere is a boon to economic well being and logically should be blessed by the world’s superpower, whether or not it is a benevolent one.

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But this logic has been betrayed -- egregiously, in the case of US abetting Georgia in its disastrous war against Russia in 2008, less obviously in likely covert US and other involvement in Chechnya and its neighbours, as well as in the Armenia-Azerbaijan stand-off over Nagorno Karabakh.

Topping the list in recent times are Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where firebrand Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili struts and threatens, running from one NATO gathering to another, embracing one US military envoy after another, as he shakes his fist at his northern nemesis and vows to retake his breakaway territories Abkhazia and South Ossetia, now fully fledged republics. This pits a NATO hopeful against a NATO foe, and despite the fact that NATO expressly forbids membership to any country with disputed borders, it continues to vow that Georgia will soon be a full member, a project that can only mean war with Russia.

US encouragement for Saakashvili in his failed 2008 war with Russia was, to put it mildly, an embarrassment for the US and should be a warning to politely distance itself from further abetting a dangerously unpredictable character. Despite the likelihood that Saakashvili's extreme pro-West policies will be reversed by a future government, the US navy is conducting war exercises at this very moment with Georgia in the Black Sea, and the Pentagon is preparing to build three military bases in Georgia and dispatch of up to 25,000 US servicemen to the country by 2015. It seems the embarrassment is also a "window of opportunity", a chance to put facts on the ground which a future government would find very difficult to change.

Georgia is a tempting morsel for other reasons. US special envoy to AfPak Richard Holbrooke just last week visited Georgia to arrange transit of arms to his killing fields via Georgia. Saakashvili offered Georgia's Black Sea ports Poti and Batumi as docks for military supply ships and the country's airports as refuelling points for cargo planes. "The route to Afghanistan is already used extensively, because almost 80 per cent of cargo which is not going through Pakistan is going through Georgia, and only 20 per cent through Russia," boasts Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Security in International Studies.

Saakashvili is pursuing a propaganda campaign aiming to destabilise the region through direct and indirect

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provocation of Russia and support of terrorists with the tacit approval of Washington and Brussels. He has launched a Russian-language TV station *First Caucasus* beamed into South Ossetia, much like Reagan's

TV Marti

set up in 1985 for Cubans. He has also reached out to Abkhazians and Ossetians to try to convince them to subvert their current governments and join Georgia.

The idea, according to analyst at the Strategic Cultural Foundation Nicolai Dimlevich, is to foment instability throughout the Caucasus and in Transcaucasia and then call for all the zones of conflict to be passed into UN, EU and/or NATO hands for safekeeping, since Russia would be proven to be incapable of ensuring the security of local populations. In this scenario, the US and NATO “benefit” from war in the region, as it is an opportunity to weaken Russia and extend control over the region. Terrifying thoughts, but unfortunately perfectly “rational”.

The failed war against Russia in 2008 also left behind storm clouds in Saakashvili's own Tbilisi, where opposition to his reckless political gambits has hardened. Even as Saakashvili blusters, key Georgian opposition figures have been visiting Moscow since late last year, disowning their president's plans. “We are prepared to receive those, who come not for fighting and trickery, but for making some changes,” Russian Deputy Minister Gregory Karasin told reporters in Geneva Georgia.” recently. Karasin quoted Georgian parliament's ex-speaker, current leader of the Democratic Movement-United Georgia, Nino Burjanadze: “When Saakashvili made a decision to wage war in summer 2008, I am quoting her ‘he intended to make Russia bend on its knees and to cause tension in relations with Russia, but Saakashvili lost the war and put the country in a tragic situation.’ We want to have open and pleasant relationship with Georgia.”

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Former Georgian prime minister Zurab Noghaideli was received by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in December, the first time that the Russian leader openly met with a Georgian opposition leader. He openly advocates cooperation between his Movement for a Just Georgia and United Russia, and has developed close ties with the Union of Georgians in Russia. Noghaideli has repeatedly stated that without a radical change in Georgia's foreign policy priorities his country's "destruction will continue", warning that "there is danger of Georgia's further dismemberment" if Tbilisi's current course continues.

"Saakashvili understands that his rule is in danger, and therefore he is prepared to plunge the country into a new war. He prefers to be a president banished from Georgia by Russia than to be banished by his own people," said Burjanadze, condemning the TV station beamed into OssetiaRussia's north Caucasus, Putin may declare it a terrorist threat and use force to shut it down. "This isn't just fantasy. It could happen." which features a talk show hosted by the late Chechen rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev's widow. Giorgi Khaindrava, a former Cabinet member and now an opposition leader, said. if the channel devotes coverage to the insurgency in

Russia's north Caucasus, Putin may declare it a terrorist threat and use force to shut it down. "This isn't just fantasy. It could happen."

The entire spectrum of Georgia's politicians agree. Conservative Party leader Kakha Kukava says, "Russia doesn't have any strategic plan towards Georgia nowadays. It is in Saakashvili's interests to provoke Russia and attract international attention to obtain support." Even "some of the people close to President Saakashvili may also agree, but they can't say so openly because they're afraid of him," asserts Noghaideli.

Perhaps Saakashvili's bluster is just hot air. But the war exercises with the US and the planned US bases are not. Nor is the fact that the south Caucasus has become a transit route for drugs to Europe and Russia. Russian Federal Drug Control Service head Viktor Ivanov said last week that the ports of Batumi and Poti are "the main ones in drug trafficking, and the Georgian city of Kabuleti is one of the key points of trafficking of Afghan heroin."

Only Saakashvili seems to think it's possible to reunite the two breakaway regions with Georgia any time soon. For better or worse Abkhazia is ever more securely tied to Russia, as confirmed by President Sergei Bagapsh's visit to Moscow last month to commemorate 200 years since Abkhazia was absorbed into the Russian empire. Though not Moscow's favourite in the 2004

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elections, Bagapsh has agreed to establish a joint military ground force for the next 49 years and to upgrade an existing Russian base at Gudauta, where 1,700 Russian troops are presently stationed. He also proposed that Abkhazia join the Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan Customs Union even though neither Minsk nor Astana has recognised Abkhazia as a sovereign state. Ironically, says analyst Sergei Markedonov, if even a half dozen European countries were to recognise Abkhazia, “maybe Bagapsh would favour European integration.” Carnegie Moscow Centre analyst Alexei Malashenko suspects that Turkey may set things in motion. “Turkey is ready to establish special relations with Abkhazia.”

The mouse’s defeat in 2008 also was an important incentive for Ukrainians to turn against their Orange revolutionaries last month. Incumbent Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich is merely expressing the will of the people when he dismisses any future move to join NATO and tones down the anti-Russian rhetoric. When Saakashvili goes, a similar move will surely take place in Georgia, as a future president tries to repair relations with Russia, though -- hopes the Pentagon -- leaving by-then existing US bases in place.